



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

*A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896*

Vol. 112, No. 3
March 2007

Contents



Amrita Kalasha

EDITORIAL OFFICE

Prabuddha Bharata
Advaita Ashrama
PO Mayavati, Via Lohaghat
Dt Champawat · 262 524
Uttarakhand, India
E-mail: prabuddhabharata@gmail.com
awakened@rediffmail.com

PUBLICATION OFFICE

Advaita Ashrama
5 Dehi Entally Road
Kolkata · 700 014
Tel: 91 · 33 · 2244 0898 / 2245 2383 /
2245 0050 / 2216 4000
E-mail: mail@advaitaashrama.org

INTERNET EDITION AT:

www.advaitaashrama.org

COVER: Cosmic Omkara

Omkara from Swami Vivekananda Temple, Belur Math
Space image by NASA, ESA, & The Hubble Heritage Team

PB March 2007

Traditional Wisdom	215
This Month	216
<i>Editorial: Remembering Swami Vivekananda – II</i>	217
Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago	219
Swami Vivekananda's Devotion to His Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi <i>Swami Tathagatananda</i>	220
The Cosmic Shakti in Action <i>Sudesh</i>	226
Relevance of Swami Vivekananda's Religious Ideas in the 21st Century <i>Dr C Venkata Madhava Reddy</i>	231
Unfolding Youthful Energies <i>Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam</i>	234
Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda <i>Mrs Alice M Hansbrough</i>	241
On Ethics, Education, and Swami Vivekananda <i>Prof. Bharati Ganguli</i>	247
Madurai, the Legendary Temple City <i>N Hariharan</i>	251
Reviews	258
Reports	261

TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

Invoking the Supreme

March 2007
Vol. 112, No. 3

य आत्मदा बलदा यस्य विश्व उपासते प्रशिषं यस्य देवाः ।
यस्य छायामृतं यस्य मृत्युः कस्मै देवाय हविषा विधेम ॥

He who is the source of life and power, whose commands all (beings), even the gods, obey, whose shadow is immortality, whose shadow is death—that God we adore with our oblations. (Rig Veda, 10.121.2)

तमीश्वराणां परमं महेश्वरं तं देवतानां परमं च दैवतम् ।
पतिं पतीनां परमं परस्ताद्विदाम देवं भुवनेशमीड्यम् ॥

We know Him who is the supreme Lord of the lords, Him who is the supreme God of the gods, the Ruler of the rulers, who is higher than the high (imperishable Prakriti), the worshipful effulgent Lord of the world. (Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 6.7)

न तस्य कार्यं करणं च विद्यते न तत्समश्चाभ्यधिकश्च दृश्यते ।
परास्य शक्तिर्विविधैव श्रूयते स्वाभाविकी ज्ञानबलक्रिया च ॥

He is without a body or organs; none like Him is seen, nor better [than He]; His supreme power is spoken of as varied indeed—His innate omniscience and might. (6.8)

न तस्य कश्चित्पतिरस्ति लोके न चेशिता नैव च तस्य लिङ्गम् ।
स कारणं करणाधिपाधिपो न चास्य कश्चिज्जनिता न चाधिपः ॥

He has no master in the world, no ruler, nor does He have any sign [by which He can be inferred]. He is the cause, the Overlord of the lord of the organs; there is none who is His progenitor or controller. (6.9)

In whom Lordship is ever established,
Who causes annihilation of delusion,
Whose most surpassing love, made manifest,
Has crowned Him with a name above all names,
The name of 'Mahadeva', the Great God!
Whose warm embrace, of Love personified,
Displays, within the human heart, that all power
Is but a semblance and a passing show, ... Him, we salute.

(Swami Vivekananda)

THIS MONTH

As our contributors continue their study of Swami Vivekananda in this number, **Remembering Swami Vivekananda – II** invites you to formulate your own understanding of his life and message.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago presents two poems: ‘A New Year’s Prayer’ and ‘Nativity of Vivekananda.’



Greatness lies in the ability to attend to the small details of one’s life in as meticulous a fashion as the larger and more public ones. **Swami Vivekananda’s Devotion to His Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi** is a fascinating narrative of

the remarkable personality of Swamiji’s mother, and and of Swamiji’s untiring efforts at fulfilling his filial responsibilities. The author, Swami Tathagatanandaji, is Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society, New York.

The Cosmic Shakti in Action is an absorbing account of the dimensions of power embodied by Swami Vivekananda as well as some of its multifarious manifestations. The author, Smt. Sudesh, is a devotee from Ambala.

Dr C Venkata Madhava Reddy, of the Department of Philosophy, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, draws our attention to the **Relevance of Swami Vivekananda’s Religious Ideas in the 21st Century**.



Unfolding Youthful Energies is a panorama of youthful responses to Swami Vivekananda’s call as seen in the National Youth

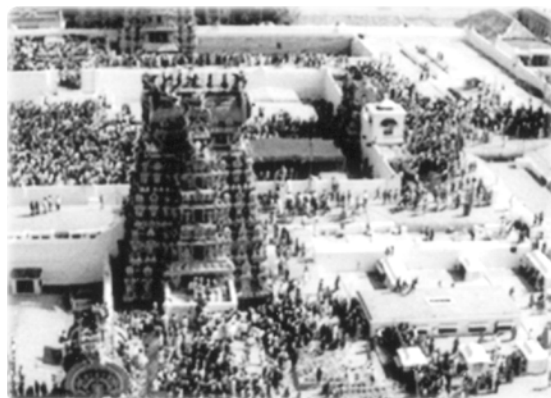
Day Competitions organized by *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*, the Tamil monthly of the Ramakrishna Order.

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough provides intimate glimpses of Swamiji’s stay at her home in the second instalment of **Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda**. The transcript of these reminiscences has been made available by the Vedanta Society of Northern California. The text has been edited by Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, and a group of Vedanta students.



Prof. Bharati Ganguli, former Principal, Institute for Education of Women, Chandranagar, concludes her discussion **On Ethics, Education, and Swami Vivekananda** with a close look at the ideal of perfection and its practicability.

The Minakshi temple at Madurai is an open book of history, legend, and art in stone—all of which complement the spiritual centrality of the shrine of Devi Minakshi. Sri Hariharan, a local resident, takes us on an educative tour of its precincts in the second instalment of his engaging story: **Madurai**,



Remembering Swami Vivekananda – II

BIOGRAPHICAL writing is both an art and a craft demanding dexterity. The range of biographies spans from the poles of dry and objective statement of facts, as in factual biographies, to the subjective fiction of the biographical novel. Between these extremes lie the critical and interpretive biographies. The former involve a critical questioning of sources and scrupulous justification of facts and deductions. Interpretive biographies reflect the author's insight into and understanding of the concerned life, which is then woven into a narrative with a strongly personal flavour. As Leon Edel, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Henry James, put it, 'When the biographer can discover a myth, he has found his story. He knows the meaning of his material and can choose, select, sift, without deceiving himself about the subject of his work.'

Spiritual Biography: Myth and History

The way a biographer chooses to select and order his or her material constitutes the 'myth' that is life-history, for even the most avowedly objective historians can only present a partial view of their subjects, a view coloured by their own thinking as well as conscious and unconscious ideological orientations. In approaching Swami Vivekananda for authentic material for his *Life and Sayings of Ramakrishna* (1898), Max Müller had 'made it as clear as possible to Vivekananda that the accounts hitherto published of his Master, however edifying they might be to his followers, would sound perfectly absurd to European students, that stories of miraculous events in childhood, of apparitions of goddesses (devi) communicating to the sannyasin a knowledge of languages and literatures which, as we know, he never possessed in real life, would simply be thrown away on us poor unbelievers,

and that descriptions of miracles performed by the Saint, however well authenticated, would produce the very opposite effect they were intended for.'

Interestingly, Swami Vivekananda clearly shared Müller's thoughts when he wrote to Singaravelu Mudaliar (Kidi) on 3 March 1894: 'Collect materials, write a sketch of the life of Ramakrishna, *studiously avoiding all miracles*. The life should be written as an illustration of the doctrines he preached.' But Müller himself claimed: 'Even his [Vivekananda's] unvarnished description of his Master discloses here and there the clear traces of what I call the Dialogic Process, and the irrepressible miraculising tendencies of devoted disciples. And I am glad that it does so, if only it helps to teach us that no historian can ever pretend to do more than to show us what a man or a fact seemed to be to him or to the authorities whom he has to follow, and not what he or it actually was.'

S N Dhar, the author of the scholarly *Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda*, argues that 'the suprasensual and supraphysical are not to be counted as among the operative forces in history', yet men like Swami Vivekananda, 'though they worked on the world's stage like their fellow-men, ... virtually "lived in God and walked with Him"'. One may not agree with them on such subjects as soul, immortality, God, etc., but it is a fact that these ideas constituted both the warp and the woof of their lives and to rule them out altogether in their biographies is to have a play of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.' 'Whether he was the god Shiva born to Bhuvaneshwari, in response to her prayers to Him, as her son, or as she sometimes rebukingly told him, one of His demons sent by Him to her, or Nara, the Incarnation of Narayana, as Sri Ramakrishna told him at their first meeting, or the Bodhisattva, or a nityasiddha, or, as he him-

self thought, “but the son of Vishwanath Datta”, he was no ordinary personality.’ It is precisely the task of the spiritual biography to represent the spiritual inclinations and experiences of its protagonist in a sophisticated manner, setting them against the socio-religious backdrop of their times.

A spiritual biography must be distinguished from hagiography, which is an idealized representation of the subject. In fact, the genre of psychobiography had its beginning in reaction to hagiography, ‘changing the biographer’s mission from deferential eulogist to psychological surgeon ... using psychological concepts to expose the hidden and often tawdry truths underneath the facades of greatness’. Sigmund Freud and Lytton Strachey, the pioneer psychobiographers, attempted to expose the ‘human foibles and frailties’ and the ‘inner lives of feeling, desire, and fantasy’ of such eminent personalities as Leonardo da Vinci and Florence Nightingale. Unfortunately, most such attempts have been fraught with series errors: strong conclusions from inadequate data, precarious causal arguments from vulnerable single clues, and analyses bordering on character assassination.

What these psychobiographies definitely do is draw our attention to the profoundly human aspect of famous and saintly characters, and remind us how our notions of correctness in spiritual life may not reflect the verifiable facts of genuine spirituality. Swami Vivekananda, for instance, has had to face criticism on numerous fronts, including such personal issues as espousal of meat-eating and a mercurial temper. It is important that we do not overlook these facts if we are to understand why he said that our ‘God is the kitchen’ and ‘Bible the cooking pots’, to understand how controlled and well-directed passion can be a great power for good. It is for this reason that both factual and interpretive studies on Swami Vivekananda, his times, and his contemporary relevance continue to be highly valued. Marie Louise Burke’s monumental six-volume *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* and Sankari Prasad Basu’s epic seven-volume *Swami Vivekananda O Samakalin Bharatvarsha* are


two such path-breaking studies. The latter volumes, unfortunately, still remain largely in the Bengali domain.

The Living Record

How do we, the ordinary non-scholarly people, get to understand Swami Vivekananda? Lady Isabel Margesson wrote this for *Prabuddha Bharata* in 1939: ‘In response to your wish that I should write a few words recalling early memories of my friendship with and admiration for Swami Vivekananda, I find to my regret that they have grown faint after the lapse of nearly forty years.

‘Perhaps it is as it should be: The memories have become absorbed into his teachings, and they live as the inspiration of my deepest thoughts and are hardly to be separated from the undercurrent of my daily life. The main impression left on me is that I had been in touch with a truth that was so large and so *gründlich* [thorough] that it contained in itself all that I had previously believed. It became a ground pattern, or a mosaic, capable of constant adjustment to fit the needs of my growing thought.’

The responses to the *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam* Youth Day Competitions clearly reflect Lady Margesson’s sentiments. Our understanding of our own selves is limited by the constraints of our personal memories. But this does not prevent our having wholesome personalities. Our understanding of Swami Vivekananda, constrained though it be by the limitations of factual data and their interpretations, can still be wholesome, and can have an equally wholesome effect on our individual and social lives.

Is each of us then going to have his or her own biography of Vivekananda? During a talk at Ridgely Manor a lady said to Swamiji, ‘Swami, I don’t agree with you there.’ ‘No? Then it is not for you.’ Someone else said, ‘O, but that is where I find you true.’ ‘Ah, then it was for you!’ It is probably in this utter respect for the other person’s view that we have the quintessential Vivekananda. If we differ in our understanding of Vivekananda, that surely is cause for celebration; that’s something Swamiji will approve of. 

Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

Two Poems: March 1907

A NEW YEAR'S PRAYER

BY ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

Let this young year that silent walks beside me,
Be as a means of grace
To lead me up, no matter what betide me,
Nearer the Master's face.
If it need be that ere I reach the fountain
Where Living Waters play
My feet should bleed from sharp stones on the
mountain,
Then cast them in my way.
If my vain soul needs blows and bitter losses
To shape it to Thy crown,

Then bruise it, burn it, burden it with crosses,
With sorrows bear it down.
Do what Thou wilt to mould me to Thy pleasure
And if I should complain
Heap full of anguish yet another measure,
Until I smile at pain.
Send dangers, death! but tell me how to dare
them—
Enfold me in Thy care,
Send trials, tears! but give me strength to bear
them,
This is a New Year's prayer.

NATIVITY OF VIVEKANANDA *

Unruffled is the mighty ocean of cosmic mind.
Lo! A light flasheth forth, riseth, taketh shape
Maya's play we see; the undivided divided.
Who can understand?
A child! All brightness, all loveliness.
How many millions of suns have been taken to
shape His form!
Ascending He entereth into those sublime regions,
Where minds are withdrawn into the Absolute.
Folding one in His arms most tenderly
Holding Him close with love divine,
Sweetly He speaks:
"O Hero, open Those Thine eyes, cease now

from meditation.
The whole world is lost in shadow.
Depart Thou there with me."
Filled, body and mind with ecstasy by that gentlest touch,
The Yogi opens His eyes, with silent tears of joy,
And the hairs of His body standing on end.
There flasheth forth a star!
Traversing the milky way it reaches earth.
Once more descends the man-God on the holy
land.
Behold!
—*Brahmachari Guru Das (Mr. Heyblom).*

* Translated from a Bengali song composed by Swami Saradananda.

Swami Vivekananda's Devotion to His Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi

Swami Tathagatananda

WHEN Swami Vivekananda was nearing the end of his life, he wrote in a letter to Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri, on 22 November 1898 from Belur Math:

I approach your Highness today on a most important business of mine, knowing well that I have not the least shame in opening my mind to you, and that I consider you as my *only friend* in this life. ...

I have one great sin always rankling in my breast, and that is [in order] to do a service to the world, I have sadly neglected my mother. ... Now my last desire is to make Sevâ and serve my mother, for some years at least. I want to live with my mother ... This will certainly smoothen my last days as well as those of my mother. She lives now in a hovel. I want to build a little, decent home for her ... Is it too much for a royal descendant of Ramchandra to do for one he loves and calls his friend? I do not know whom else to appeal to. The money I got from Europe was for the 'work,' and every penny almost has been given over to that work. Nor can I beg of others for help for my own self. About my own family affairs—I have exposed myself to your Highness, and none else shall know of it. I am tired, heartsick and dying. Do, I pray, this last great work of kindness to me.¹

This is one of Swamiji's most remarkable letters, bearing every mark of tenderest affection for his mother. He was Love incarnate; love seems to drip from every word in this letter. Here we find in Swamiji a rare blend of the strength of steel and the softness of dew.

Swami Vivekananda and Ajit Singh had a very intimate and cordial relationship. On his first visit to Khetri, Swamiji spent two and a half months with him. On 17 December 1897, at Khetri, Swamiji said in a meeting that whatever little he had done

for the uplift of India would not have been possible had he not met the Raja of Khetri.² Again, he wrote in a letter to Munshi Jagmohanlal on 11 October 1897, 'Certain men are born in certain periods to perform certain actions in combination. Ajit Singh and myself are two such souls—born to help each other in a big work for the good of mankind. ... We are as supplement and complement.'³ In the light of this intimate and friendly closeness with the Raja of Khetri, we can easily understand how Swamiji could make such an appeal to the raja for assistance to his mother.

Touched by the tone and temper of Swamiji's letter, the Maharaja wrote immediately to Swamiji, inquiring about the cost of maintaining a house for his mother. On 1 December 1898, Swamiji wrote back to him, 'One thing more will I beg of you—if possible, the 100 Rs. a month for my mother be made permanent, so that even after my death it may regularly reach her. Or even if your Highness ever gets reasons to stop your love and kindness for me, my poor old mother may be provided [for], remembering the love you once had for a poor Sâdhu.'⁴

After receiving this letter, the Maharaja at once sent five hundred rupees to Swamiji, but for various reasons, the idea of building a house was dropped. Some time later, Swamiji took a loan of five thousand rupees and purchased a house from his aunt, who cheated him outright by refusing to hand over the title deed. On 6 August 1899, he wrote in a letter to Mrs Ole Bull, 'The aunt whom you saw had a deep-laid plan to cheat me, and she and her people contrived to sell me a house for 6,000 Rs., or £400, and I bought [it] for my mother in good faith. Then they would not give me possession, hoping that I would not go to court for the shame of taking for-

cible possession as a Sannyasin' (9.118–9).

During his second stay in America, Swamiji again was compelled to think about his mother and the problems she faced. In a letter to Mrs Ole Bull dated 17 January 1900, he wrote, 'It is becoming clearer to me that I lay down all the concerns of the Math and for a time go back to my mother. She has suffered much through me. I must try to smooth her last days. Do you know, this was just exactly what the great Shankaracharya himself had to do! ... leaving my mother was a great renunciation in 1884—it is a greater renunciation to go back to my mother now' (8.489–90).

On 7 March 1900, Swamiji wrote to Mrs Ole Bull:

As for my mother, I am going back to her—for my last days and hers. The thousand dollars I have in New York will bring Rs. 9 a month; then I bought for her a bit of land which will bring about Rs. 6; and her old house—that will bring, say, Rs. 6. ...

... All my life I have been a torture to my poor mother. Her whole life has been one of continuous misery. If it be possible, my last attempt should be to make her a little happy. I have planned it all out (8.496–7).

On 18 May 1900, Swamiji again wrote to Mrs Bull, 'Mrs. Sevier gave me 6,000 Rs. for family—this was distributed between my cousin, aunt, etc. The 5,000 Rs. for buying the house was borrowed from the Math funds' (9.137).

Swamiji left America on 26 July 1900, and eventually returned to India in shattered health due to diabetes, dropsy, and asthma, the sight in his right eye almost gone. In spite of that, he never abandoned any duty which he considered sacred. He continued to visit his mother, and tried to alleviate her economic troubles and solve her family prob-

lems as best as he could.

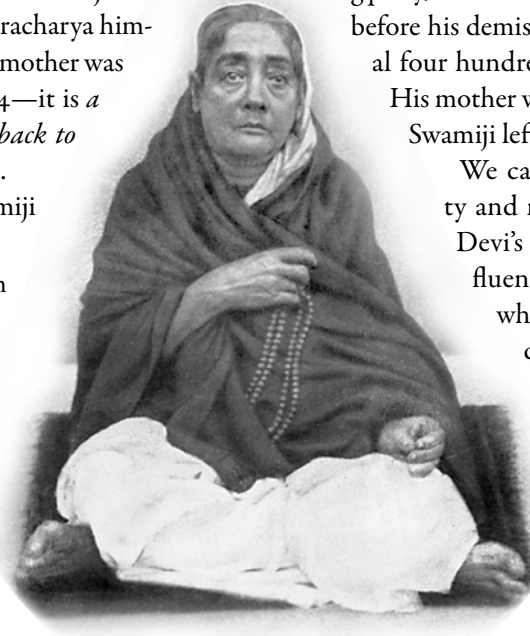
Though Swamiji's plan to build 'a little cottage' for his mother on the Ganga ever remained a dream unfulfilled, he continued to strain every nerve to settle the court case over a property dispute that had started when Swamiji was fourteen years old. He went to his mother's residence on 19 June 1902, gave an additional thousand rupees to the opposing party, and settled it. On 2 July, just two days before his demise, Swamiji gave an additional four hundred rupees to settle the case. His mother was sixty-one years old when Swamiji left his body.

We cannot understand the purity and nobility of Bhuvaneshwari Devi's character, and hence her influence on Swamiji's character—which inspired Swamiji's deep devotion to her—without a brief look into Swamiji's parental background.

The mother for whose welfare Swamiji demonstrated such exemplary devotion and dedication was an extraordinary woman. She was the embodiment of the

timeless virtues that form the backbone of India's culture. In India, mothers are the custodians of the cultural training of their children. Therefore, the entire future of the country is completely in the hands of mothers. The ancient lawgiver Manu writes, 'From the point of view of reverence due, a teacher is tenfold superior to a mere lecturer, a father a hundredfold to a teacher, and a mother a thousandfold to a father.'⁵

We will make our humble study of the great and noble character of Bhuvaneshwari Devi (1841–1911), keeping this idea before us. She was the only child of her parents, who were very well known in northern Calcutta. She was short in stature and very beautiful, with a regal gait that Narendranath inherited. Sister Christine recalls:



Srimati Bhuvaneshwari Devi

[Swamiji said:] 'After she hears the Ramayana read, she can recite what she has heard.' ... He [Swamiji] considered a good memory one of the signs of spirituality.

Many were the stories he told of his mother—the proud, little woman who tried so hard to hide her emotions and her pride in him. How she was torn between her disapproval of the life he had chosen and her pride in the name he had made for himself. ...

Those of us who were privileged to see his mother, know that from her he inherited his regal bearing. This tiny woman carried herself like a queen.⁶

Manmatha Nath Ganguli, a disciple of Swamiji who saw Bhuvaneshwari Devi in her old age, gave this account: 'Her very appearance commanded respect. She was a strongly built lady with large fine eyes and long eyelashes. She had a remarkably strong personality that made her obeyed without any questioning. No wonder that Swamiji had inherited these qualities from her' (345).

Swamiji's Noble Father and Grandfather

The Datta family of Simulia in northern Calcutta was well known for its wealth, education, and charity. Swamiji was born Narendranath Datta, son of Vishwanath Datta (1835–1884) and Bhuvaneshwari Devi (1841–1911).



Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral home, Kolkata, below, and Vishwanath Datta's study, left



vaneshwari Devi (1841–1911). Vishwanath's father, Durgaprasad, had a strong desire to become a monk and renounced the world in 1835 a few months after Vishwanath was born. In obedience to scriptural injunctions, he paid only a brief visit to Calcutta after twelve years of spiritual practices.

An interesting anecdote about Swamiji's grandfather that is related to this visit reveals his mettle as a monk. Durgaprasad took shelter in the house of a friend who assured him that his presence would remain secret. However, unable to conceal his joy, his friend informed Durgaprasad's family, who immediately whisked him away. Meanwhile, without losing his mental equipoise, Durgaprasad sat in the corner of the room he was given; the door was locked. For three days, he did not touch any food. Fearing that he might die, his relatives finally unlocked the door, and Durgaprasad disappeared. Later, Vishwanath searched in vain for his father in Varanasi.

Vishwanath's mother also proved her mettle. One has to imagine how difficult it was for her to raise her son while enduring the constant enmity, hostility, and selfishness of her husband's family. His affectionate mother passed away when Vishwanath was about twelve years old.

Now an orphan, he grew up in the family of his uncle Kaliprasad, who usurped much of Vishwanath's rightful property. Despite this unsympathetic behaviour, Vishwanath 'reverenced and generously helped the uncle, though he was well aware that he was cheated by him at every step'.⁷

Vishwanath embraced the trend of his times, during which there was a blending of the Hindu and Islamic cultures with the culture of the West. He developed into a man with a modern outlook. He was proficient in many Indian languages as well as English. He studied music, for which he had a great love, under an ustad. People in Calcutta remembered his love for music and his generosity well after his death.

He enrolled himself as an attorney-at-law in the High Court of Calcutta. His eminence in legal practice took him to many places in northern India. A man of liberal temperament, he enjoyed the

culture and literature of people belonging to other religions. He read not only the Hindu scriptures but the poems of Hafiz and the Bible as well. He was very liberal-minded and deviated a little from orthodox Hindu traditions in his food, dress, and other personal habits. He was completely at home with his Muslim and English friends. Once he presented a copy of the Bible to his son Narendranath and remarked, 'All of religion is to be found in this one book.'⁸

Vishwanath was free of superstitions. When Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed the marriage of young widows, for example, Vishwanath supported it. Once, in Lahore, he worshipped the Divine Mother Durga in a picture and enjoyed her festival in the company of many people by offering them consecrated food. But according to Swami Saradananda, 'to earn money, live amply, and make others happy by practising charity as far as possible—these constituted the highest purpose of his life' (ibid.). In fact, Vishwanath's huge earnings in the legal profession were spent extravagantly to maintain a large retinue of dependents. As one of his sons later wrote, 'Extending charity to the poor and the distressed was like a disease with him.'⁹

Sister Christine recalls Swamiji's words about his father:

'To my father,' he said, 'I owe my intellect and my compassion.' He would tell how his father would give money to a drunkard, knowing for what purpose it would be used. 'This world is so terrible, let him forget it for a few minutes, if he can,' the father would say, in self-defence. His father was lavish in his gifts. One day when he was more recklessly extravagant than usual, his youthful son said, 'Father, what are you going to leave me?' 'Go, stand before your mirror,' was the father's reply, 'and you will see what I leave you.'¹⁰

Swamiji's Noble Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi

When she was only ten years old, Bhuvaneshwari Devi was married to Vishwanath Datta, who was sixteen. Vishwanath was very fortunate to have Bhuvaneshwari as his wife. She was his good com-



Swamiji's maternal grandmother Raghumani Devi, above, and her house, right.



panion in every respect, sharing the joys and agonies of her husband's large, joint family and faithfully following the traditional pattern of Hindu life. She demonstrated a profound capacity to remain silent in spite of the harsh injustices inflicted on her by her guardian uncle-in-law and his wife—to the extent of not providing her with more than one sari to wear. Bhuvaneshwari silently endured all the injustices heaped on her by their immediate guardians. This was eventually noticed by her husband, who once grumbled, 'How is it that I who earn so much money see that my wife does not get [a] bellyful to eat!' The anguish he expressed had no effect at all on the aunt and uncle.¹¹

Bhuvaneshwari Devi lived almost her entire, long life in the Datta family, from her marriage at age ten until her death in 1911. Due to a family quarrel, separation was forced on Vishwanath Datta, and he moved to another place, where Narendranath studied for his BA. Bhupendranath Datta writes: 'After separation, our family removed temporarily from the ancestral place and hired a house at 7, Bhairav Biswas Lane, where Narendranath studied to prepare himself for the B. A. Examination' (ibid.). However, the family shortly returned to their ancestral home, much to the uncle's consternation.

After Vishwanath Datta's death, Swamiji's family was sheltered by Swamiji's maternal grandmother, Raghumani Devi (c. 1825–1911) at her house at 7 Ramtanu Basu Lane, which Swamiji described in



Lord of Heroes, Vireshvara Shiva, Varanasi

his letter to the Raja of Khetri as 'a hovel'. Bhupendranath Datta wrote, 'We stayed with her till 1903. She supported us and suffered for us. She had to part with ... rented land ... for conducting the law-suit brought against us by our aunt'(111). The difficulty of her life in a joint family headed by an unscrupulous uncle who, along with others, foiled their every legitimate claim at every opportunity, can only be imagined.

Bhuvaneshwari Devi's Austerity and Prayer for a Son

Vishwanath and Bhuvaneshwari had four sons and six daughters. Their first child, a son, and their second, a daughter, died in childhood. Their next three children were daughters. The birth of a son, according to ancient tradition, is always welcome in a Hindu family. Naturally, Bhuvaneshwari Devi longed for a son. Down the ages, Hindu women have invoked the grace of God to tide over their difficulties in life. Their wants and grievances are made known to God and they practise various austerities and read scriptures to invoke his grace. Bhuvaneshwari Devi observed *somvara vrata*, fasting and praying on Mondays, praying to Lord Shiva. An elderly aunt of the family who was living in Varanasi was asked to 'make the necessary offerings and prayers to Vireshwar Shiva that a son might be born to her'.¹²

Bhuvaneshwari Devi observed all the injunctions meticulously. Her whole-souled devotion to Lord Shiva was fulfilled through his grace. One

night, she had a vivid dream: 'She saw the Lord Shiva rouse Himself from His meditation and take the form of a male child who was to be her son' (11). On Monday, 12 January 1863, *Makara Sankranti*, their son Narendranath was born at a very auspicious time, his features strongly resembling those of his grandfather Durgaprasad. He also inherited his mother's melodious voice, taste for sacred music, and extraordinary memory. It has been written of Bhuvaneshwari Devi:

Above all, Bhuvaneshwari Devi was deeply religious in temperament, and used daily to perform herself the worship of Shiva. She was not given to much talking. Calm resignation to the will of God in all circumstances, power, and reserve characterized this noble Hindu woman. The poor and the helpless were the special objects of her solicitude. Like Vishwanath, Bhuvaneshwari Devi had a very sweet voice and could beautifully sing the songs on Sri Krishna as heard in religious dramas. When beggars singing religious songs came to the house to beg, she could learn their songs by listening only once. She was, indeed, noted for her unusual memory and knew by heart long passages from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. More important, she had absorbed the essence of these timeless epics, and that essence, together with the culture to which it was the key, she passed on to her children as their great heritage.

It was, then, to these two, Vishwanath and Bhuvaneshwari Devi, that the boy who was to become the greatest man of his age, whose influence was to shake the world, and who was to lay the foundation of a new order of things, was born (8-9).

Swamiji was their sixth child. Their seventh and eighth children were both daughters. The last two children were sons: Mahendranath and Bhupendranath, both of whom lived long lives.

The most exalted law of motherhood is the law of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the lifeblood of a mother's existence. Bhuvaneshwari Devi raised her prayer-born child with utmost care, infinite patience, and constant prayer. The child Narendranath became her whole being. As we read about his early life, we are struck by the deep impact of her personality

upon the formation of his character.

The following anecdote reveals his mother's unique personality. Once, Narendra was unfairly punished by his schoolteacher without justification. When Narendra told his mother about it, she consoled him:

'If you are right, my boy, what does it matter? It may be unjust and unpleasant, but do what you think right, come what may.' Many times he suffered, many times he was misunderstood even by those nearest and dearest to him when he adopted a course which to them seemed strange, but which to him was inevitable because, in his opinion, it was right. The maxim he had learned, and which he followed always in life was, 'Stick to your guns, dead or alive!' (34).

Swamiji's mother always counselled her children to be truthful, chaste, dignified, and humane. In their plastic minds, she imprinted the eternal values of healthy living.

Other Exceptional Qualities of His Mother

Bhuvaneshwari Devi demonstrated her exceptional capacity in managing the affairs of a large, complicated household. She was free of superstition and valued education for her daughters as well as her sons. She sent her two eldest daughters to be educated at Bethune College and her two younger daughters to Rambagan's Mission school. Jogendrabala studied English with Miss Kamini Seal, Principal of the Bethune College. Mrs Macdonald, the wife of Prof. Macdonald, used to come to teach her as well at home.¹³

Most of the members of the Datta family participated in the annual Hindu mela organized by Nabagopal Mitra in 1867 to encourage and advance national pride in India's cultural heritage. Bhuvaneshwari Devi's daughters contributed samples of their handicrafts. One year, two of her children received one of the highest awards—her daughter Haramani for her exhibit of a *jari* (embroidery) design on red velvet and her son Naren for gymnastics. In the Youbert Exhibition of 1880 in Calcutta, her daughter Jogendrabala's exhibit of a garland of

beads also won a medal.¹⁴

In the midst of her rigorous duties, Swamiji's mother had found time to learn English. She could converse in English with Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine when they visited her. She personally taught primary English lessons to her three sons at home. Along with her secular training in English, she imparted moral instruction. She emphatically told them that, in spite of the hardships and many troubles one encounters in life, one should never abandon moral principles.

She also found time to read daily from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, to read the Bengali literature of the day, and to compose Bengali verses. Her Bengali handwriting was exceptionally beautiful. Thanks to her prodigious memory, Narendranath learned many stories from the epics and Puranas at her knee. He shared many of these with Sister Nivedita, who revised and immortalized them in her own style in *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*. (To be concluded)

References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 9.108-109.
2. Sailendra Nath Dar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda* (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1976), 1027.
3. Benishankar Sharma, *Swami Vivekananda—A Forgotten Chapter of His Life* (Calcutta: Oxford Book and Stationary, 1963), 118.
4. *Complete Works*, 9.110.
5. *Manu Samhita*, 2.145.
6. Sister Christine in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), 174-5.
7. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 4.
8. *Comprehensive Biography*, 6.
9. *Life*, 6.
10. Sister Christine in *Reminiscences*, 175.
11. Bhupendranath Datta, *Swami Vivekananda, Patriot-Prophet: A Study* (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1954), 107.
12. *Life*, 10.
13. *Patriot-Prophet*, 139.
14. *Comprehensive Biography*, 11.

The Cosmic Shakti in Action

Sudesh

DURING the early days of their association, Narendranath (later Swami Vivekananda) used to say that Sri Ramakrishna's visions and ecstatic talks with the Divine Mother were the fabrications of his mind. He tried to explain to the Master that science and philosophy had proved that, prompted by our own desires, we may see or hear things which may not really exist. Modern Western physiologists and psychologists also claim to have proved the illusory nature of the visions experienced by certain people designated as mystics. As the Master tried to kindle divine love in Narendra, the latter opposed him with all his intellectual powers. It was only after he himself experienced the Mother as the all-pervading conscious and living Presence that he was convinced of her reality. Mother, the inscrutable power of Brahman, is the perennial fount of divine love and beauty. With doubt transcended, Swamiji's whole life became one of eternal worship and unquestioning surrender to the Mother's blessed feet, 'contemplated by the Goddess of Fortune Herself ... worshipped by service true'.¹

Through every thought, every action, and every utterance of his, it was Shakti, the power that is the Mother, that was manifested. Pandit Shivananda, 'who was very learned in Sanskrit philosophy and had attained a high state in practical sadhana', was close to Swamiji and had this to say about him: 'I am fully convinced that the lectures and other preachings which have made him so renowned are but secondary to his soul-uplifting force. The divine *shakti* plays in him and very little of it is manifested. It is impossible to judge his greatness and power—he seems to be an ocean without bounds.'² Multifarious were the modes of expression of this Divine Energy. It was manifested through Swami

Vivekananda's divine effulgence, his eloquence, his magnetic personality, his power of purity, his equanimity in praise and blame, his strength and courage in the face of the hurts of the wicked, his tireless giving of his light and of himself to the world, and his unceasing love and service to his motherland. His whole life can be viewed as the Cosmic Shakti in action.

Power of Self

Even as a child, Narendranath showed an irrepressible restlessness—the visible expression of an immense internal dynamism, of vitality and power. The power which was to move the world could not possibly be harnessed so easily. His mother had to have two nurses for him. The boy who did not believe in superstitious ghost stories would later break the back of deep-rooted superstition and religious bigotry, in both the East and the West. The boy who showed indomitable will and undaunted courage in saving a theatrical performance from disruption would go on to manifest more profound powers of the Self during his *parivrajaka* days. The same power would also resound in his speeches and utterances. During his wandering days, many a time, Swamiji had been in the jaws of death. Many a time he felt dizzy from exhaustion—starving, footsore, and weary, he could neither think nor walk. Life seemed to be ebbing away. On such occasions he asserted his higher nature: 'Is it not true that within the soul resides all power? How can I be weak? ... I am It! The whole of nature cannot crush me.'³ And he would rise up, reinvigorated, his mind flooded with light.

Power of Self-control

Swami Vivekananda's very first words, 'Sisters and

brothers of America'—uttered in his melodious voice—evoked a storm of applause at the Parliament of Religions. It was the irresistible power of *Vak* (the Divine Mother as speech) that spoke through his lips the sublime truths of Hinduism. He was acclaimed as the 'Prophet of a New Dispensation,' 'an orator by Divine right'. His unprecedented success aroused strong jealousy among orthodox Christians and many pseudo-metaphysicians because he 'spoiled their business'. They criticized his philosophy vociferously and even made attacks upon his character. Even his own countryman P C Mazoomdar tried to vilify him. However, the profound wisdom that poured forth from his lips in a rhapsody of divine eloquence won for him many ardent admirers among distinguished persons and liberal-minded clergymen. His friends asked him to give a rejoinder to his detractors. But the Swami only blessed them, for they who gave the blows and he who received them were one and the same Reality. Sometimes he would only utter 'Shiva! Shiva!' as if reminding himself of his true nature, in which everything of a disquieting nature melted away.

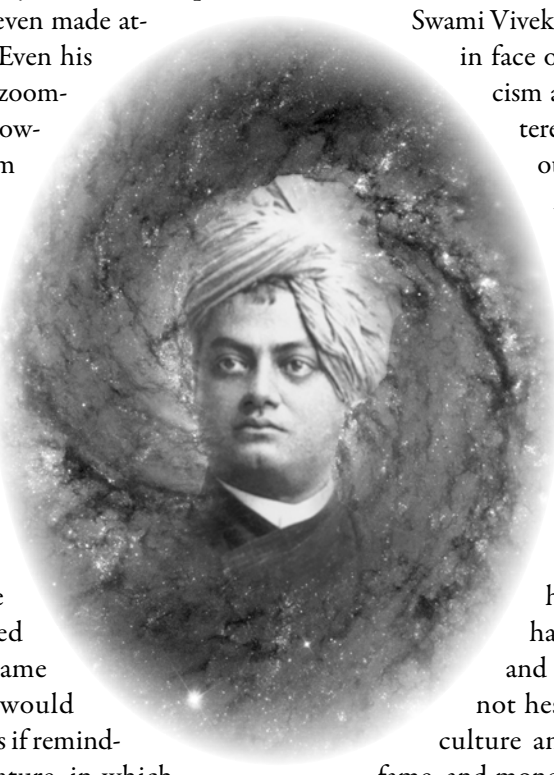
The spiritual unity of all humanity was Swami Vivekananda's message, and he actually demonstrated this awareness. It was 'superdivine power' that enabled him to maintain the deepest mental poise: 'Nature wants us to react, to return blow for blow ... to hit back with all our might. Then it requires a superdivine power not to hit back, to keep control. ... Superhuman power is not strong enough.'⁴ Amidst the bedlam created by spiritual cranks, Swamiji continued to preach peacefully God, Love, and Truth. Being fully convinced of

the greatness of the power that worked through him, he could not be moved to approbation by any amount of praise or success. Nor was he unnerved by the antagonism of inimical and bigoted missionaries. The detractors and scoffers were silenced by the force of his personality, by his extraordinary moral, intellectual, and spiritual endowments, and by his exceptional energy and willpower.

In Defence of His Motherland

Swami Vivekananda kept perfectly calm in face of the bitter personal criticism and opposition he encountered everywhere. Yet he vigorously refuted the defamers of his country. He thundered fearlessly at the missionaries' and Ramabai circle's misrepresentation and condemnation of India's culture, customs, religion, and the position of women in India. He emphasized that the Hindu ideal of womanhood was divine motherhood. Other Indians who had gone to the US before and during Swamiji's time had not hesitated to criticize Indian culture and religion to win name, fame, and money. That he dared to single-

handedly defend his country in alien land amidst hostile conditions speaks volumes for his power. All by himself, he dispelled the carefully-orchestrated Western notion of India as a 'benighted country' beset with half-naked savages and jugglers. In its place, he called attention to the great treasures of universal thought and wisdom which India held. He made the West aware that India had that light which the contemporary globe required in its pell-mell of spiritual unrest—and the light was not in magic, mummery, or charlatanism, but in the sublime precepts of Vedanta.



Arise! Arise! A tidal wave is coming! Onward! Men and women, down to the Chandala (Pariah)—all are pure in his eyes. Onward! Onward! There is no time to care for name, or fame, or Mukti, or Bhakti! We shall look to these some other time. Now in this life let us infinitely spread his lofty character, his sublime life, his infinite soul. This is the only work—there is nothing else to do. Wherever his name will reach, the veriest worm will attain divinity, nay, is actually attaining it; you have got eyes, and don't you see it? Is it a child's play? Is it silly prattle? Is it foolery? 'उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत—Arise! Awake!' Great Lord! He is at our back. I cannot write any more.—Onward! I only tell you this, that whoever reads this letter will imbibe my spirit! Have faith! Onward! Great Lord! ... I feel as if somebody is moving my hand to write in this way. Onward! Great Lord! Everyone will be swept away! Take care, he is coming! Whoever will be ready to serve him—no, not him but his children—the poor and the downtrodden, the sinful and the afflicted, down to the very worm—who will be ready to serve these, in them he will manifest himself. Through their tongue the Goddess of Learning Herself will speak, and the Divine Mother—the Embodiment of all Power—will enthrone Herself in their hearts.

—Swami Vivekananda

Swamiji's one concern was to awaken all humanity to its own godhood: 'to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every moment of life' (7501). He taught the people in the West the universality of religious truths and the reality of the one infinite Existence of which all manifestations are but varying expressions. Many westerners, conditioned as they had been by long habits of thought and education to opposing views, were surprised and captivated by this message of simple truths. Helen Huntington wrote to the editor of the *Brahmavadin* on 2 March 1896: 'The Swami Vivekananda has preached to us a religion that knows no bonds of creeds and dogmas, is uplifting, purify-

ing, infinitely comforting, and altogether without blemish—based on the love of God and man and on absolute chastity.'⁵ Swamiji made people aware that the much-vaunted Western civilization often consisted principally in the art of destroying one's fellow humans, while Western science could not answer the most vital questions of life and being. The present-day civilization was only multiplying human wants and the consequent distress. It was through him that Americans got to see for the first time the depth and beauty of Hindu religion and culture.

In the midst of the intense activity he had to undertake in the US, Swamiji set in motion his work in India. From the other side of the globe, he roused in his brother-disciples a dynamic spirit to raise the Indian nation by injecting confidence in its cultural and spiritual ideals. He exhorted them to serve the poor, the miserable, the downtrodden—who were sinking lower and lower in the vortex of destitution and ignorance—as manifestations of God. He pointed out the tyranny of self-centred priests who had reduced the glorious Eternal Dharma to 'don't touchism' and a 'frog-in-the well' attitude, which led to the degeneration of the nation.

Power of Purity

From Swami Vivekananda emanated a tremendous spiritual force. Even in his casual remarks on trifling matters this soul-force was manifest. What exactly was this power which all felt but none could explain? Perhaps it was *ojas*, the power of purity. It is the power generated by transmuting the physical and instinctual forces of the body into spiritual energy. When this *ojas* is raised from the lowest chakra—*muladhara*—to the region of the pineal gland, the thousand-petalled lotus of the *sahasrara* blossoms fully. It was so in Swamiji's case, and that is why he was seen as holiness itself; that is why he had at his command the power to move the world. The words he uttered in his discourses were more felt than heard, for they were charged with this power. Blessed were they who saw and heard him. They were transported to high states of spiritual awareness.

There was a growing despair and uncertainty in truth-seeking men and women in the West during Swamiji's time. Mere belief in religious dogmas and doctrines could not satisfy their thirst for spirituality. Swamiji's illuminating talks on the vastness and eternity of the soul and on human divinity gave them a powerful tool by which to cut the doctrinal shell and see into the kernel of Reality. Those who had knocked long at the gates found those gates opening for them. Recalling the wonderful days at Thousand Island Park, Sister Christine wrote:

'Once the necessary [household] work was over and we had gathered in the class room, the atmosphere was changed. ... It seemed as if we had left the body and the bodily consciousness outside. ... Which gate to the Eternal would be opened for us today? What heavenly vision should meet our eyes? ... The Undiscovered Country, the Sorrowless Land opened up new vistas of hope and beauty. ... We saw the Promised Land. ...

Miss Dutcher, our hostess, was a conscientious little woman, a devout Methodist. How she ever came to be associated with such a group would have been a mystery to anyone who did not know the power of Swami Vivekananda to attract and hold sincere souls. But having once seen and heard him, what could one do but follow? Was he not the Incarnation of the Divine, the Divine which lures man on until he finds himself again in his lost kingdom?' (2.33-4).

What was that power that so attracted Sri Ramakrishna and filled him with a constant agonizing desire to see his beloved Naren; and why would his mind merge in the Indivisible Absolute at the very sight of Narendra? It was this power of purity, of *ojas*, which gives a tremendous power of attraction. In Swamiji, purity was a burning, radiant, spiritual force. His very presence meant love, peace, and joy. Even a ferocious tiger walked away peacefully from his presence when he thought of offering his body to the hungry beast. What becomes of them who come under the influence of this power? Their ideas, values, innate tendencies, and aims and purposes of life are channelled in a new direction; the entire personality is transmuted. Once Swamiji was

Shakti as Shiva: Then at the request of the Mahanta, Swamiji and others went into the temple of Kedarnath [at Varanasi]. Out of respect to Swamiji, *arati* of Shri Kedarnath was performed, although it was not the usual hour for it. But Swamiji, as soon as he entered the outer chamber of the temple where Nandi (the Bull) stands facing the Ganga, opposite the Lingam, became entranced into *samadhi* and stood at the door, still and motionless, without any outer consciousness. He could not move even a step further and stood there as a statue. His socks were getting wet, but none advanced to remove them, as everyone there had also entered into an inner sphere where the outer world and its activities were automatically suspended. Shri Ramakrishna used to say, 'Within Naren's body is Siva.' Also he said that Swamiji was one of the Seven Seers who came down on earth at his behest. And we were privileged to see this inner personality manifested before us. Everyone there could see and did feel the divine presence.

—Swami Sadashivananda

staying at Ridgely Manor as a guest of the Leggets. Josephine MacLeod later reminisced:

One evening he was so eloquent ... his voice becoming so soft and seemingly far away; when the evening was over, we all separated without even saying goodnight to each other. Such a holy quality pervaded. My sister, Mrs. Legget, had occasion to go to one of the rooms afterward. There she found one of the guests, an agnostic, weeping. 'What do you mean?' my sister asked, and the lady said, 'That man has given me eternal life. I never wish to hear him again.'⁶

Once in New York, becoming aware of his power over the audience, he suddenly stopped, to everyone's disappointment. On being questioned later, he explained that he found that the minds of his listeners had become like soft clay in his hands and he had the power to give them any shape he wished. But to do so was against his philosophy, he said, for he wanted everyone to grow according to their

natural inclination.⁷

When Swami Vivekananda sang or chanted hymns, his magical voice penetrated into the hearts of his listeners and lifted their minds to supernal heights. 'Narendra's songs were no music in the common sense, but they were the vibrations of the Logos, "the word which was with God and which was God", the pulsation of the primeval *Nada*, the cosmic sound that instantly kindles the spark of dormant divinity in man.'⁸ Who can capture the tone of that voice in black and white? What pen has the power to convey the majesty, the glory, the force that emanated from his person and his words? Embodiment of the noblest of human aspirations that Swamiji was, everyone could take from him what suited him or her best. Josephine MacLeod said that she took mainly energy from him and manifested that most. But when she told Sister Nivedita that he was all energy, the latter replied that she found him all love.⁹ Romain Rolland wrote: 'The thought of Sri Ramakrishna and especially of Vivekananda is, above all, flexible and adapts itself often to different kinds of souls for whom it is meant.'¹⁰

The Power Remains

The form is gone. The voice is gone. Yet, the force of the Cosmic Shakti that embodied itself as Vivekananda remains spread, as it were, throughout space. No distance of time or space can hinder its flow. Swamiji told a Western devotee, Mrs Edith Allen, to call upon him if she ever got into psychic difficulty. He gave her the assurance that he would hear her, even though hundreds of miles away. Mrs Allen testified that she 'had occasion to take advantage of his promise many times.'¹¹ K S Ramaswami Sastri had come in contact with Swamiji in 1892, when he was only fourteen years old. Sixty years later, long after Swamiji was no more in his physical body, he had the opportunity to visit Belur Math and meditate in Swamiji's room. As he sat there thinking of Swamiji and his service to India, and to the cause of spirituality all over the world, he felt that the divine flame of spiritual knowledge was lighted in his heart.¹²

Naturally dreamy and meditative, Swamiji longed to retire to the Himalayan quiet and to live in his own element. The strain of years of sadhana in the East and a constant whirlwind of activity in the West had almost shattered his nerves. Yet, a life of solemn peace and quiet was not for him. His life was to be a sacrifice to the motherland, an oblation to humankind, and an eternal surrender to Mother Kali—the source and embodiment of all Power—that took possession of his body and soul and made him work with ever renewed vigour. Whether he was in good health or ill, She whirled him, as it were, in a vortex of work. He was the chosen instrument of the Mother. Without any thought of personal comfort or rest he worked incessantly. Filled with universal love, he said that even after he threw off his body like a disused garment he would not cease 'preaching and helping mankind until all shall come to know the highest Truth.' His years on earth were not many. But many were the ways in which the Cosmic Power worked and manifested through him!



References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 4.501.
2. *His Eastern and Western Admirers, Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), 405-6.
3. *His Eastern and Western Disciples, The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000) 1.353-4.
4. *Complete Works*, 2.6-7.
5. *Life*, 2.66.
6. *Reminiscences*, 238.
7. *Life*, 2.487-8.
8. *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita Centenary Memorial*, ed. D P Gupta and D K Sengupta (Sri Ma Trust: Chandigarh, 1982), 129.
9. Linda Prugh, *Josephine MacLeod and Vivekananda's Mission* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 1999), 307.
10. Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana, *Tantine, The Life of Josephine Macleod* (Dakshineswar: Sri Sarada Math, 1990), 219.
11. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987), 6.20.
12. *Reminiscences*, 105.

Relevance of Swami Vivekananda's Religious Ideas in the 21st Century

Dr C Venkata Madhava Reddy

TODAY, the world is full of sceptics who have little or no faith in religion, who feel that God has no place on earth, who dismiss all religion as mere 'dogma.' On the other hand, the world is also full of dogmatists who believe that their beliefs comprise the only truth, who even live and die by the gun to enforce their dogmas on others. At this critical juncture, Swami Vivekananda's ideas and teachings on religion are most relevant. If ever we require the study of his message, we require it now. With his remarkable message of love, sympathy, tolerance, and service to humanity, Vivekananda gives new hope to humankind, both in India and across the globe.

One of the most significant events of the 19th century is surely the advent of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. Their pragmatic idealism was a rewarding inspiration at a time of crisis: when the individual and the nation faced a choice between materialism and spiritualism. In fact, we still face this choice today; it is the eternal choice facing humanity. So we remember their life and message with all eagerness, for therein we find the solutions to the problems not only of India, but also of the whole world.

Vivekananda does not belong to any particular country or people; he is a great inspirer of all humankind. Today, we are gradually learning to see him in that global perspective. It may take centuries to fully understand him as the revolutionary Vedantist, saint, sage, prophet, social scientist, and philosopher that he is. He himself said, 'Let the world realize what contribution I have made, it will take quite a long time to understand that.' It always takes a long time for the world to grasp great ideas; gradually Vivekananda's great ideas are finding firm

foundations and are spreading everywhere.

Swami Vivekananda's revolutionary and constructive programmes have given new direction to the country. His work was not only to revitalize religion but also to reform humanity. He knew that true emancipation of humanity can come only through being truly scientific and truly spiritual simultaneously. Vivekananda was a man of perfect spiritual realization: his outlook on all spheres of our national life springs from this viewpoint. He realized that throughout her history and during all periods of her national life, India has had a unique way of looking at life: she has always stood for the spiritual ideal. He understood that the degeneration of this ideal created all kinds of problems for her. So he wanted to invigorate the nation with a great wave of spiritual power. In fact, he knew that this wave had come in the form of Sri Ramakrishna; he saw himself as only a message-bearer. Therefore, he was fundamentally concerned with awakening each soul to realizing the divinity within. Vivekananda wanted to tune all aspects of our national life to this ultimate spiritual goal. 'If you want to know India, study Vivekananda,' counsels Rabindranath Tagore; and he adds, 'In him everything is positive and nothing negative.'

The Three Approaches to Religion

In studying Swami Vivekananda's ideas on religion, we find three distinct approaches. One may be called devotional or reverential; the second, analytical or comparative; and the third, practical or spiritual. He did not preach any particular religion, but the central truth of all religions, the realization of which will break all barriers of dogmatism, sectarianism, and narrowness. He categorically states:

Freedom as Religion: Another New Testament assertion is borne out, then, in the legacy of Vivekananda. 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' This was his primary work. You will remember the four freedoms that President Roosevelt once uttered in a speech to the Congress on 6 January 1941, when the shadows of World War II were deepening: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. Swami Vivekananda added another: freedom from ignorance. It is that freedom which is the underlying key to deliverance from want and fear. It is that freedom which gives full expression to freedom of speech and freedom of worship. Ignorance is the ultimate agent which retards human development into our full potential.

So what did freedom from ignorance mean for Vivekananda? It meant that each of us must awaken from the ignorance of our true nature. His life and message constituted a clarion call for each person to experience the *Upanishad's* truths: '*Aham Brahma asmi*', and '*Tat tvam asi*.' 'I am Brahman', and 'That thou art' as well. A discovery of this true identity would be the vehicle of liberation for all his listeners, then and now.

—Hal W French

'Religion is not talk, or doctrines or theories; nor is it sectarianism. Religion cannot live in sects and societies. It is the relation between the soul and God ... Religion does not consist in erecting temples, or building churches, or attending public worship. It is not to be found in books, or in words, or in lectures, or in organisations. Religion consists in realisation.' Religion is thus a way to know the ultimate reality. This ultimate reality is named Brahman or God or the Absolute, and is the source of birth, life, and death.

Swami Vivekananda emphasizes the power of religion for manifesting good: 'Religion is the greatest motive power for realising that infinite energy which is the birthright and nature of every

man. In building up character, in making for everything that is good and great, in bringing peace to others and peace to one's own self, religion is the highest motive power and, therefore, ought to be studied from that standpoint.' Religion injects spiritual power into human beings; this power in turn guides them in the right direction. A true person of religion is a moral giant with good character and conduct. A religious person goes beyond the senses and evolves into a superman or -woman whose thoughts are purified, and whose sympathies embrace every living being in the world. Religion is thus the healthiest exercise for the human mind.

For Vivekananda, religion is a process of evolution, through which we experience a larger and deeper view of life. We then go beyond personal pleasure, profit and loss, success and failure, and reach to the highest dimension of love, service, and self-sacrifice. Religion is the way to infinite inner growth: the highest goal of religion is to be found within ourselves. It finds its expression in sharing love, goodness, and happiness with all creatures.

The Universality of Religion

Vivekananda is unequivocal: religion is realization—realization of the divinity of the soul in every individual. The universal truth lies in this Self-realization. Different religions adopt different means to attain this goal. Though the books, doctrines, and dogmas may differ, though the temples, churches, and mosques may differ, still, these are not what religion really is. Every religion is interrelated with every other in the sense that the ultimate aim of all religions is the same. To say that one religion is true and another false is unjustifiable. He makes it clear: we are born divine; it is because of ignorance that we are unable to realize our inner divinity.

Vivekananda strove to bring unity among the different religions. He understood that each and every religion contains some element of truth in it; to that extent it should be accepted and respected. The goal of all religions is perfection of humanity. All religions nourish the soul to live and act in the freedom of the divine spirit and in the awareness

I was struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission, which Vivekananda established as early as 1897 with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Both place the human being at the centre of their efforts aimed at development. Both place tolerance at the top of the agenda for building peace and democracy. Both recognize the variety of human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage.

—Frederico Mayor

of supreme oneness. To effect this unity of religions, he tried to establish the concept of universal religion. Vivekananda's universal religion doesn't lie in establishing any institution for it. It lies in cultivating the right attitude of respecting all religions without thinking that one's own religion is true and others false. By universal religion he doesn't mean converting people to Vedanta, making people Vedantins. Universal religion comes to life the moment all religions coexist peacefully. Then will religious hatred, fanaticism, and wars be things of the past. At the Parliament of Religions, he proclaimed: 'Upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension".'

Practical Spirituality

An embodiment of practical Vedanta, Vivekananda preached the doctrine of oneness of existence, and practised renunciation and service. He established the Ramakrishna Mission to serve the human gods on earth. He dedicated himself and his work to the divine through his sincere love for all human beings. Free from hatred—for anyone or any religion—he embodied universal love and sympathy. He strove to end the conflicts tearing society apart—conflicts which arise from the feeling of difference—by awakening understanding of the Vedantic doctrine of oneness of existence. This doctrine places humanity at the centre as well as the circumference.

Though Vivekananda is a spiritualist, he is not against material progress. He emphasizes that a starving person never realized God. He remembers: 'Did not our Gurudeva use to say, "An empty stomach is no good for religion"?' It is through spreading education and feeding the poor that India will be raised. Intellectual, moral, and spiritual progress can be achieved only by solving the burning problem of poverty. Practical religion lies in serving the poor, the hungry, the uneducated.

It is in this realistic and progressive approach to religion that Vivekananda's ideas are most relevant in the 21st century.

PB

True religion unites, but the dogmatists pick out only those things that can divide people and inflame their minds. And the irony is that these intolerant and aggressive exponents of religious chauvinism are called 'fundamentalists'. They should really be called non-fundamentalists, since they are either ignorant of the fundamentals of religion or choose to ignore them.

Rejection of such intolerance and fanaticism demands a rational outlook. Swami Vivekananda struggled all his life against the fallacious assumption that rational thinking is important only in philosophy and science but not in religion. By training as well as temperament, he was a rationalist. His scientific and rational approach, even when he was explaining the truths of religion, has extracted the admiration of many modern men, including Jawaharlal Nehru. 'I believe in reason,' Swamiji declared, 'having seen enough of the evils of authority, for I was born in a country where people have gone to extremes in trusting authority.' No religion can have universal validity if it does not carry conviction, if it is afraid of being subjected to rational enquiry. ...

'If a religion is destroyed by rational investigation,' he says, 'it was not religion at all but superstition. All that was dross would be taken away and the essential parts would emerge triumphant from rational enquiry.'

—V S Naravane

Unfolding Youthful Energies

Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam Youth Day Competitions

(Continued from the previous issue)

ON 16 July 2004, 94 children lost their lives in a tragic fire at a school in Kumbakonam. In memory of these children, the theme of YDC 2005 was 'How to Act Appropriately in Times of Emergency'.

This year's contest aimed at fostering creativity and self-expression among students, instilling self-confidence and faith in God to help face challenges, and introducing students to Swamiji's inspiring 'man-making' ideas.

More than 46,500 students from 400 schools participated in the contest; 23 schools were awarded special prizes for their participation.

The questions posed to the contestants from classes 6 to 9 were: (i) What will you do when your parents, due to some tension at home or office, cannot shower their love on you? (ii) What will you do if a person suddenly faints in front of you? (iii) If your friend teases your teachers, what will you do as a responsible student? (iv) What will you do to prevent exam fear that troubles you even after you study well?

The participants from classes 10 and above were given the following posers: (i) How would you react to a bomb scare in your school? (ii) Would you

join fan clubs or other similar organizations while studying in school/college? If yes, then do you think that would hinder your studies? (iii) What steps would you take to banish exam-fear?

What They Said

The responses to these questions showed that many students:

- possess a natural compassion and a proactive attitude for helping others;
- feel that it is teachers who mould students into responsible and honest citizens;
- recommend meditation, yoga, and prayer as effective antidotes to counter fear, frustration, and negative feelings;
- emphasize the role of courage and strategic thinking in countering emergencies.

When parents can't shower their love

P Ilayaraja: 'A child's umbilical cord signifies the everlasting bond of love between mother and child. Our parents are symbols of that love. Even in their sleep, our parents struggle to make us better citizens of the world. Every day they fight a losing battle to make both ends meet. They should experience the shower of love from their children and

get drenched in that. There are only two books which all of us need to read in our life. One is our mother, the other our father. They are the ones who burn their present to ensure our future. Let us read them first and love them next.'

'If you learn to be happy with what you have and stop worrying about what you do not have, then life will be an



என் குழந்தைகளான நீங்கள்
என்னைவிட நூறு மடங்கு
சிறந்தவர்களாக இருக்க வேண்டும்
என்று நான் விரும்புகிறேன்.
- சுவாமி விவேகானந்தர்

I want each one
of my children to
be a hundred times
greater than I
could ever be
—Swami
Vivekananda



P Ilayaraja



T Niveda



A M Ashraf Ali



S Kritika

eternal carnival. Thank the Lord for his blessings. Be happy for his beautiful gifts,' said another student.

K K Jeevan wrote: 'If parents take care of their children, the children will become 'nationalists'. If they do not take care, they will turn into 'terrorists'.

T Niveda: 'If you develop an attitude of not expecting anything in return for your actions, there will not be any disappointment, and hence there will be no fear. So, instead of complaining that my parents do not love me or they have no time for me, I would try to help them in small ways as the squirrel helped Sri Rama in its own small way to build the bridge between Sri Lanka and India.'

If your friend teases your teachers

A M Ashraf Ali: 'A student teasing his or her teachers is like the matchstick attempting to burn the sun, the dog barking at

the moon, tears laughing at the sea and dewdrops desiring to cover the earth fully. I will tell this to such students without hurting their feelings.'

This question elicited some poetic praise for teachers. According to S Kritika: 'The dew falls softly and nobody sees it, or hears it. Yet, it makes the rose bloom and adorn the world. The job of a teacher is similar to dewdrops, making the students bloom and spread fragrance.'

Senthilkumar had this to say of his teachers: 'We are raw diamonds and you have cut and polished us. We are crude stones and you have sculpted us into statues. We are the plain grassland and you have turned us into flower gardens. We are mere flowers and you have made us into fragrant garlands.'

To prevent exam fear

E Radha suggested: 'if you have studied well, your fears will vanish like mist in front of sun-

shine. If you believe anything is difficult, then difficult it will be. Do not allow worries to get above your knees. Consider examination as an opportunity and prove yourself.'

M Fatima: 'If there is an entrance to a house, it will have a door. The door will have a lock. The lock is like the problems that we face every day. Every problem has its solution hidden within itself. Only those who have viewed problems as opportunities have achieved greatness and glory.'

M Vaidehi: "Be prepared" is the motto of the National Cadet Corps. So, apart from being ready to accept victory with fortitude, we should also be prepared to face defeats with the right attitude. If we have such a disposition, we can write our exams without fear.'

K Katyayini: 'Anything we do with love and liking, will not cause any fear in us. Let us like our studies as much as we like the game of cricket; then, every subject will have us hit centuries and thus have a field day.'

P Narayanan: 'While young, children should read epic stories instead of ghost stories. They sow the seeds of mental strength and right living.'

How would you react to a bomb scare?

P Pandiselvi: 'When the news about the bomb is received, if the students are removed from the place without delay, without being specifically informed about the problem, that would be timely. It would also avoid a stampede and consequent deaths. We should act with prudence and caution at such times.'

Y Veerakumar: 'I will determine in my mind to save everyone with calmness and confidence. I will be in full readiness and avoid any negative fallout due to my actions. I will investigate the veracity of



M Fatima



M Vaidehi



K Katyayini



Y Veerakumar



An awards ceremony

the rumour fully and according to the authenticity of the available information act quickly to minimize the damage.'

On joining service organizations during studies

E Radha was confident that 'joining social service organizations will make us active, patriotic, bold, fearless, and spiritual. It will never be a hindrance to our education.'

M Satishkumar observed, 'By joining genuine service organizations, I can help in educating the poor, in improving work skills of the handicapped, in eye and other organ donations for needy patients, and in increasing awareness about the need for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.'

According to M Fatima: 'There is no need to set apart time for doing patriotic deeds. Every moment we spend with alertness, awareness, honesty, and unselfishness amounts to our watering the roots of our national tree.'

To A Senthamil Selvi, political activism is of primary importance: 'I believe that honest politicians are required today. They are the ones who rule the country. Hence it is meaningless to decry politics and politicians. Unless we jump into the fray, contest elections, and win them, how can we sit on the throne of democracy and enact people-friendly welfare laws? How otherwise can we light the lamp of prosperity in people's lives?'

R Satyamani was more circumspect: 'In his days, Swami Vivekananda was asking for a hundred youngsters to build a new India. Today thousands of youngsters are asking for just one Vivekananda to lead them and guide them to greatness.'

YDC 2004: A Week for Positive Action

In 2004, 12,307 students participated in the contest. Students from rural areas participated in greater numbers in comparison to the inaugural year. A total of 106 schools were represented. The participants included 97 students from Sri Lanka and 47 inmates of the Cuddalore Jail, assuring us that Swamiji's message has penetrated the thickest of walls and the hardest of minds. We were reminded and reassured of Swamiji's non-sectarian appeal by the students of Hussaini Higher Secondary School, Chennai, who were the first to send in their entry forms. The only two qualifications needed to imbibe Swamiji's messages seem to be an open mind and a loving heart.

The participants were asked to perform specific tasks each day of the week (and beyond), beginning January 6, and to write about their ennobling experiences. The following were the suggested action-areas:

January 6: Offer pranam to your parents in the morning with a feeling of love and reverence and help them in housework during the day.

January 7: Respect your teachers, observe classroom manners, and read about great people who revered their teachers.

January 8: Practise concentration of mind. Pray to God to give you will power.

January 9: How well can you face defeat? Ponder over that possibility and write about the ways to eradicate the weakness which stands in the way of your functioning to your full potential.

January 10: Do you treat women with respect? Resolve not to indulge in eve teasing. Read books which strengthen you emotionally and intellectually. Read good works of great authors.

January 11: When milk is scarce, a misguided youngster offered 'milk *abhisheka*' to the cut-out of his favourite film star. How does this news affect you? What do you think Swami Vivekananda would have said if he met such youth? How do such people influence today's youth?

January 12: Serve the poor and the weak today. You could also clean up a portion of your school or

your home or a temple. Write about the good work that you did today.

What They Said

On showing reverence to parents

A boy wrote, 'I had never, till today, prostrated before my parents, seeking their blessings. I thank *Vijayam* which taught me to do this and helped me experience great fulfilment.'

Another student had a special prayer for God: 'My parents should not fight with each other at least today.'

V Sandhya: 'After I paid my respects to my parents, it appeared as though my own conscience had more respect for me. I had a strange kind of joy inside me, as though I had done puja to my parents.'

On treating teachers with respect

Many participants referred to President Dr Abdul Kalam and Dr B R Ambedkar, who have always remembered their teachers with gratitude.

'I don't like the teachers who always scold me. From today I shall learn to respect all teachers, because of this contest,' declared Nivedita.

'The student who doesn't obey his parents at home and is not controlled by his teachers at school comes out into society as a brute, with destructive tendencies,' opined another student.

On concentration and prayer

'Swami Vivekananda had said that concentration of mind will help one study well. I have experienced this. I wake up daily at 3.30 a.m. and as my first act read a few pages from Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's *Gospel*. Then I concentrate my mind upon the image of Holy Mother and pray. I devote similar concentrated attention upon my studies and handwriting too. There has been a significant improvement in my handwriting. This is the first success I have obtained for my efforts,' wrote R Kotishwari.

R Vaishnavi: 'I try to take as much interest in my studies as I usually have for my music. I can feel that I take less time to understand the lessons when I study with full concentration.'

R Shanmugam presents a picture of perfect

concentration: 'The TV will be blaring; my father will be chatting loudly with his friends; there will not be any let-up in telephone calls—all contributing to the mayhem. But my attention will not, even for a moment, wander from my studies.'

K Jahnavi tells a story: 'There were two tortoises. One was deaf and the other had normal hearing. Both fell into a ditch and were struggling to climb up. The passers-by who saw their plight said that the tortoises could never possibly climb the whole distance. The tortoise that could hear these remarks gave up its struggle and made only half-hearted efforts for escape. But the deaf one was frantic and eventually succeeded in getting out of the hole. From this we can understand that full involvement in one's efforts will surely yield success.'

On facing defeats boldly

P Nandini: 'I follow what my teacher has told me, that I should not carry failures to my heart and success to my head.'

According to Swapna, 'Without failures we cannot learn anything in life, since failures are stepping stones to success. I will first create a conducive atmosphere and then think of ways of succeeding.'

On the evil of eve teasing

'Chastity is common for man and woman. The education we receive should serve as a protective force behind us to ensure this chastity in everyone,' says a student.

'I am the lioness-cub of Swamiji. In our sacred land of Bharata, where our ancestors taught us to love even birds and animals, eve teasing and adam teasing have raised their ugly heads today. This results in madness. I will neither support nor indulge in this insanity,' wrote R Anantalakshmi.

L Vijayakumar shared some candid thoughts: 'Till now, I used to make fun of girls, but only in



M Satishkumar



V Sandhya



K Jahnavi



their absence. But I feel ashamed to mention it here. Hence from now on, even if I can't consider women as divine, I shall consider them as my sisters.'

Vishwamalya: 'Men and women are the two eyes of society. Even if the power of one eye diminishes, it affects the total vision. Eve teasing is like one

eye belittling the other eye. Hence, I will always behave with dignity. I will ever remember the eternal words of the Tamil Poet Bharati: "*Aanum pennum nigarenakkolvadal arivilongi ivvaiyagam thazhaik-kume*; When men and women consider themselves as equals, then will this world prosper with people who excel intellectually."

R Aishwarya exuded a quiet assurance: 'Since we study in a school where high moral standards are taught, we get to hear the messages of Swami Vivekananda often. As such we won't even dream of indulging in such acts as eve teasing.'

On offering milk abhisheka to cutouts

T Ananta Aishwarya Vidya feels, 'Swamiji would have said to him, "I want only strong pillars to build the foundation of a strong India, not the axes which cut at the very roots and foundation of the nation."

R Shanmugam: 'Performing milk *abhisheka* to cutouts, self-immolation for a film actor or a politician, shaving the head clean for a political party, removing half of the moustache for the defeat of an election rival, etc. are deeds which even those in lunatic asylums would not think of doing. I pity such people, condole with them, and pray for them.'

Y Riaz Khan: 'Swamiji would tell such persons: "If you want to become great, have only great

thoughts and speak and act accordingly. Those who indulge in petty acts cannot become achievers.'

On doing someone a good turn

'Although I come from a poor family, I possess the wealth of *love*,' said H Chendur Nayagi. 'Today I shared it with many. I also cleaned up my house, which is my temple, where my parents, who are my gods, reside. This is a part of my daily routine.'

This is what R Sharanya did: 'Today I went to a shop to buy books and on the roadside I saw a six-year-old child begging. When I saw that, I began to worry about the ills of our nation. Many speak vociferously on platforms about our nation's progress but they fail to work towards making it happen. What does mere slogan-shouting about eradication of poverty achieve? Later, I took that child home, gave him food and then went with my father to have the child admitted in a home for the destitute children nearby.'

V Singaravelu wrote from Central Prison, Cuddalore: 'In memory of Sri Ramakrishna, I planted three tree saplings and tended them.'

P Prashant: 'With my mother's permission, I gave one of my shirts to a poor boy.'



R Aishwarya



Y Riaz Khan



R Sharanya



P Prashant



K Ramesh



Paul Durai

YDC 2003: 'Acquiring Noble Qualities'

In its inaugural year, 9,555 students participated in the contest. The positive feedback and the encouragement received from the schools and the student fraternity emboldened us to continue the contest with greater vigour in later years.

What They Said

K Manoj said he 'likes Swamiji's words that tell there is [in reality] no upper caste or lower caste in society.'

R Kotishwari was of the opinion that according to Swamiji it is selfishness that prevents one from becoming a Jesus or a Buddha. She said, 'I too shall overcome my selfishness which stands in the way of my becoming a Swami Vivekananda.' She dreams of starting an exclusive TV channel for the youth, to spread the message of Swamiji.

K Ramesh highlighted the pragmatic nature of Swamiji's teachings: 'Every little incident which has happened in Swamiji's life is a lesson for us youngsters. When an innocent man was booked by the police for a wrong, I intervened and got him released.'

S Ganesan wrote: 'I keep Swamiji's message "Face Problems Boldly" in my mind. Today when I was travelling by bus, the conductor abused a person. I remembered Swamiji and told the conductor not to abuse him like that. Everyone praised me for my boldness.'

T Mohanavalli: 'I participated in an oratorical contest because of the insistence of my friends. Although I had prepared my speech well, when I got on stage, I became nervous and started shivering. Then I remembered Swamiji's words "It is a sin to think that you are weak." That gave me courage. I spoke well, to the wonderment of all present.'

Paul Durai: 'The mind, which is like a monkey, is chasing us constantly. Hence I learnt to face it. I have made Swamiji reside in my heart. When Swamiji climbed a tree, even the ghost on the tree ran away. So too, Swamiji has made the ghosts of selfishness, greed, anger, and lust run away from me.'

'If Swamiji's message reaches all the schools and colleges in Tamil Nadu, there will surely be a big cultural resurgence. There is no doubt about it'—so felt another student.

K Parameshwari tells us what is to be done when we are undecided about things: 'Since I do not have the mental maturity to decide for myself what my

The Courage to Face Fire



Naduvakurichy is a sleepy village where Nagaparvathy lives. Every day she used to be a mute witness to the grown up boys playing cards and the young boys playing

marbles under the banyan tree in the village square. She had seen the *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam* questionnaire which said: 'Write about any memorable incident in your life which Swami Vivekananda would have approved of and appreciated.' Every day she used to ponder over this and wonder what to write.

One day she was returning from school. There were rows of huts by the wayside. The inmates were farm labourers and had gone for work. Suddenly she heard the sound of people shouting and wailing. She found one of the huts on fire. The few people around were in shock and stood watching the scene. And then they heard the cry of a baby from inside the burning hut. But nobody dared to rush in to save the child. Nagaparvathy understood the situation in an instant. She gathered her loose clothes around her and entered the hut. She quickly picked up the baby in her arms and ran out. She fell to the ground as she escaped the blaze. But she held the baby close to her so that it was not harmed. The onlookers had by now been spurred into action. They sprinkled water on Nagaparvathy and the baby to revive them and also managed to get the fire under control.

Later, Nagaparvathy wrote: 'I know I am not a bold girl. But where did I get the courage to act decisively at that crucial moment? It must be Swami Vivekananda who entered into my mind and gave me the courage, because I was constantly thinking as to what I should do to make him proud of me.'

The special prize for 2003 was quite befittingly awarded to a proud and beaming Nagaparvathy.

life's goal should be, I pray for success and fame in whatever path I choose for myself with the guidance of my teachers and the blessings of my parents.'

K Parimala Devi had a quiet resolve: 'The Sri Ramakrishna Vidyalaya, where I study, is the best social service organization that I know of. After I complete my studies in my school, I intend to work for one year in this school, without any salary, on a voluntary basis. This selfless thought itself makes me feel good and has elevated me and my conscience.'

Muhammad Pir announced with immense conviction: 'As long as there is brightness in the sky, as long as there is sweetness in honey, Swami Vivekananda's name and glory will remain on this earth.'

This contest has given us a new awareness about the potential of 'youth power' to change the face of the world for the better. The participants brought us face to face with lofty dreams as well as deep-rooted and clear convictions. They revealed an abundance of faith in themselves and in the glorious future of the Indian nation. If their minds were confronting endless upheavals, they also possessed unlimited enthusiasm to follow and implement Swami Vivekananda's path-breaking and life-enriching message.

This determination is echoed in the following statement of S Vasantha Vallinayagi: 'I wanted to go abroad to earn lots of money. But after reading Swamiji's thoughts on service and purity, I want to spread whatever knowledge I have gained among

poor children and help them in getting proper education to improve their living standards.'

Another student's sincere prayer could well inspire all of us: 'I want firmness in my principles; a mind which will not vacillate when others are against me; an attitude which likes creative changes, and the courage to walk in new, unexplored directions. I pray to the Almighty to grant me all these.'

Silent Work

Any work done with the thought of the Divine and a selfless spirit amounts to *tapas*, say the wise. Swami Vivekananda has been a silent agent of change, working through the minds of many *tapasvis* and *tapasvinis*, strengthening many a feeble mind. This has been clearly borne out by our interaction with the participants. Swami Vivekananda's words remind us that we may grow more food, and grow more wealth, but if we fail to grow more character, everything may end up in ashes. So it is important that we know how to grow more character. The YDC invites conscientious youth to respond to this challenge.

Many of the youth who follow Swamiji are preparing themselves right now to undertake important administrative and social responsibilities and take India forward to the heights that Swamiji foresaw. May their conviction and boundless energy strengthen their hands and spirits and may their steely resolve defy the obstacles that they might encounter on the way. May all their youthful dreams for our motherland become enduring realities with

Are You Young? Then Write to Us!

Youth is the time when your minds and hearts are both receptive and perceptive. It is in your youth that you perceive the world in its true colours and form your value judgements. Send us anecdotes and stories recording your own experiences about contemporary society, its values and ideals, about human relationships, about real-life problems and moral dilemmas and how you work them out. Instructive humour is also welcome.

Not so young? You can reminisce about your youth or tell stories about your youthful contemporaries. Sharing them with our readers may be well worth your time.



Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

(Continued from the previous issue)

‘Do you remember the topics of the classes, or the name of any book he used?’ the swami asked.

‘No,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied, ‘but the classes were all taken down in shorthand, and some were later printed in *Prabuddha Bharata*. Sister Nivedita sent for them. In all, she got some forty lectures and class notes of Swamiji’s work. At first we had Mr Bagley, the nephew of Mrs John J Bagley with whom Swamiji had stayed in Detroit in 1894, to take the notes. I remember that he said Swamiji was “very hard to follow”. Later we had Miss McClary, who followed Swamiji everywhere.

‘This same Miss McClary on another occasion asked Swamiji if it were true that Hindu mothers threw their babies into the Ganges because they did not want them. He answered, “Yes, Madam, but I was one who escaped.” After a moment he added, “Nowadays all the babies are born of men.” Miss McClary then realized her own stupidity and hid herself behind her chair. Swamiji said, “I don’t blame you. I would, too, if I had asked such a question!”

Swami Ashokananda asked if there was anyone still living who had copies of all these notes, but Mrs Hansbrough could think of no one. She said that one copy of each had been sent to Sister Nivedita and a copy to each of the magazines in India.

The Swami then asked about Mrs Hansbrough’s close contacts with Swamiji after the lectures and classes had begun.

‘In connection with the work, I always saw him before and after the lectures and classes.

‘During questions after one of the classes, Mr Bransby asked Swamiji what difference there was between a cabbage and a man, if all things are one. Swamiji could be sharp on occasion. His answer

was: “Stick a knife into your leg and you will see the line of demarcation.”

‘On another occasion, a woman asked who supported all the monks in India. “The women, Madam,” Swamiji replied, “the same as in your country!”’

‘And when was it that you asked him to visit you?’

‘I think it was at Mrs Blodgett’s home, once when Helen and I were there together.’ Mrs Hansbrough smiled. ‘Sometime before—as a matter of fact, before we had even met Swamiji, though it was after his second lecture—I one day said to my sisters, “Do you know, I think Swami Vivekananda wants to come to visit us.” My sisters thought I was crazy. However, I defended my thought by pointing out that the swami was not well and that he might find our home restful. We were then living [at 309

Swami Ashokananda (right) with Mr A Clifton (later Swami Chidrupananda), who recorded the conversations with Mrs Hansbrough presented in this article. Photo c. 1934.



VEDANTA SOCIETY OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



Josephine MacLeod, 1898

Monterey Road] in Lincoln Park, which is now called South Pasadena, in a rented house. The property and the house are still standing, and the room still intact in which Swamiji slept (for he did come later to stay with us).’

‘Of course we know that Swamiji was not well, but how did he look at that time?’ Swami Ashokananda asked. ‘Did he look unwell? Would anyone know from his appearance that he was ill?’

‘Oh no,’ Mrs Hansbrough told him. ‘He always looked bright, especially when he was particularly interested in something. Then his eyes actually sparkled.’

‘When he declined my invitation to visit us, he was very gracious. I had explained that our home was very unpretentious, but that we would be very happy to have him with us. He smiled and said, “I do not need luxury”, and explained that he was comfortably situated at Mrs Blodgett’s.’

‘Later on [in late December] I asked him to come for Sunday dinner [probably on Christmas Eve]. He readily accepted, and asked me to invite Miss MacLeod also. When I asked Miss MacLeod, she wouldn’t believe Swamiji had accepted my invitation. She herself went to ask him about it, and he told her, “Yes, and you are to come too.”’

‘It was about an hour’s ride on the electric train for them to reach our house. The train stopped just at the corner, and then they had only a few steps to our door.’

‘I can see the picture of them now, standing at the front door, so I must have met them when they arrived. After speaking to each of us as he came in, Swamiji turned and walked into the living room. The tall windows looked out through the trees in our garden. Swamiji walked to one of them and stood for some minutes looking out, the white curtains framing him against the sunlight. Then he

turned and spoke, answering again the question I had asked him at Mrs Blodgett’s: “Yes,” he said, “I will come to visit you!”

‘Then he wanted to come right away, and he soon did. He had but one trunk, but he had many clothes, for he was always well dressed when he went out or met strangers. At home he cared little for his dress; he was most casual about it. Once while my nephew Ralph was blacking his shoes, he remarked, “You know, Ralph, this fine lady business is a nuisance!” He knew what was expected of him in public. When Mrs Bowler had invited him to speak in Pasadena, she had specifically asked that he wear his turban.

“Do you *have* to wear the turban?” I asked him, for by that time he had given it up. “Don’t you understand?” he said. “She wants the whole show!”

Swami Ashokananda then asked about Mrs Hansbrough’s closer contacts with Swamiji after the lectures and classes had begun.

‘In connection with the work, I always saw him before and after the lectures and classes. I remember one evening when we were going home after a lecture he asked me how I had liked it. He had been very outspoken that evening in criticism of the West, and I said that I had enjoyed the lecture but feared that he sometimes antagonized his audience. He smiled as if that meant nothing to him. “Madam,” he said, “I have cleared whole halls in New York!”

‘I think the finest gesture I ever saw him make,’ Mrs Hansbrough went on, ‘was in connection with a rumour of scandal which arose about him while he was in Los Angeles. Professor and Mrs Baumgardt came to see Swamiji one morning and the subject came up in conversation. They had heard of it but thought nothing of it. We were all seated in the dining room except Swamiji, who was walking slowly up and down the room. Finally he said, “Well, what I am is written on my brow. If you can read it, you are blessed. If you cannot, the loss is yours, not mine.”’

The conversation then turned once more to Swami Vivekananda’s lectures, and Swami Ashokananda asked where Swamiji gave ‘Christ the

Messenger’.

‘It was at Payne’s Hall,’ Mrs Hansbrough told him. ‘We had moved from the chapel in the Home of Truth, because Swamiji did not feel free to speak critically of metaphysical ideas from their platform. The original title of that lecture, you know, was “The Message of Christ to the World”; it was changed after it was sent to India.

‘Swamiji was introduced by a Dr John Smith, a physician who greatly admired Swamiji. The lecture drew a tremendous crowd: more than a hundred people were turned away. The Mr Blanchard for whom the hall where Swamiji gave his first lecture was named, was present at this one, and the size of the audience was not lost on him.* When Swamiji had finished, Mr Blanchard came up to me on the platform, where Swamiji was talking to some people. ‘I would like to make some money out of this man—for him as well as for myself,’ he said. ‘Could I announce to the audience now that he will speak next Sunday at Blanchard Hall?’ I told him I could not give him such permission. He then went to Miss MacLeod, who did give him permission. So while Swamiji was still there, Mr Blanchard announced from the platform that Swami Vivekananda would speak the following Sunday at Blanchard Hall, and that the admission would be ten cents. Mind you, there had been no admission charge at this lecture.

‘When Swamiji heard this announcement, he turned and asked who gave the man permission to make it. Somehow Miss MacLeod crawled out of it, and Swamiji turned on me. He was thoroughly annoyed and looked quite angry. He said the man should not have been allowed to make such an announcement. And he could not be persuaded to give the lecture at Blanchard Hall. He pointed out that he had had no end of trouble trying to get rid of people who wanted to make money out of him. We learned later that [on the following Sunday] more than one hundred people went to Blanchard

Hall nevertheless, and waited on the steps.

‘This episode almost broke up the lecture series, but it was after this that he lectured at the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena. After one of the lectures at the Shakespeare Club I said to the swami, “Swamiji, I think you would like me to go on to San Francisco.” His eyes lighted up as they always did when he was particularly interested in something and he answered, “Yes, of course I would.”

‘My sisters, Helen and Carrie, did not think much of the idea and discouraged it from the beginning. They did not feel that I was a “big” enough person to do what was necessary. They also felt that I was not “socially inclined” enough, and they never did think I was very bright.’ Mrs Hansbrough’s eyes twinkled. ‘At any rate, Swamiji brought the matter up again himself one morning after breakfast, when he and I were sitting alone at the table. “Well, when are you going to San Francisco?” he asked.

‘I was taken a little by surprise, as I had more or less abandoned the thought. “Why, I could go, if you wanted me to,” I answered. He seemed to have sensed that I had been discouraged from the plan by my sisters’ opposition. “When once you consider an action,” he said, “do not let anything dissuade you. Consult your heart, not others, and then follow its dictates.”



The Shakespeare club, Pasadena, right, and assembly hall, below



* In addition to his five morning classes in the first week of 1900, Swamiji gave two evening lectures in the auditorium of the Blanchard Building.



Swami Vivekananda, fourth from right in the middle row, on the Echo Mountain House Funicular, Mt Lowe, 13 January 1900.



‘Not long afterward a letter came from Dr B Fay Mills of the Unitarian Church in Oakland, inviting Swamiji to go there. So I said to Swamiji, “Well, I needn’t go now.” However, Swamiji wanted to give his first lecture independently, and was unwilling to start any San Francisco work with a lecture at the Unitarian Church. “We will support our own work,” he said. “I am willing to trust an American woman. I will trust an American man sometimes. But an American minister—never!” He gave his first lecture in San Francisco on February 23 at Golden Gate Hall, on “The Ideal of a Universal Religion”.

‘Speaking of San Francisco reminds me of a remark he made to me one evening after one of his lectures here. Several of us were walking home with him. I was in front with someone, and he behind with some others. Apropos of something he had been discussing, he said, “You have heard that Christ said, ‘My words are spirit and they are life.’” He pointed his finger at me and declared, “So are my words spirit and life; and they will burn their

way into your brain and you will never get away from them.”’

It was now late in the evening. The talk turned to Swamiji’s actual coming to San Francisco, so it was decided to continue the discussion on another evening. Swami Ashokananda said goodnight to Mrs Hansbrough and returned to the Temple.

Sunday, March 23, 1941

Sunday, March 23 was bright and cloudless, with a spring-like breeze that tempered the warm sun. After his morning lecture in the Century Club Building, Swami Ashokananda invited Mrs Hansbrough to drive home with him. On the way, the swami asked Mrs Hansbrough for further details regarding Swami Vivekananda’s stay in Los Angeles. After driving to the ocean beach and then through Golden Gate Park, the swami ordered the car to be parked overlooking the waters of Lake Merced.

‘Tell me now,’ Swami Ashokananda began, ‘how long Swamiji stayed at your home in Los Angeles.’

‘It must have been all of four weeks,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘He came in late January 1900 and it was on February 21 when he left to come to San Francisco.’

‘Did he ever express any opinion about Los Angeles?’

‘Yes, he said, “It has an atmosphere like India: it is restful.”’

‘And did you have many conversations with him while he was in your home?’ the swami asked.

‘Oh yes. Usually they were in the evening. Every night we would sit after dinner was over, and he would talk on many subjects: philosophy, science, our national development—’

‘You mean development of the United States?’ the swami put in.

‘Yes,’ Mrs Hansbrough answered. ‘He was very much interested in all phases of our national life. But he did not like to see the great concentration on material affairs. Swamiji said that our civilization would fall within fifty years if we did not spiritualize it.’

‘He did say that?’ the swami asked. ‘Did he ever

say that from the platform, or only in private conversation?’

‘Oh, only in private conversation. He said we were deifying material values, and that we could never build anything lasting on such a basis.’

‘How long would these conversations last in the evening? About what time would Swamiji retire?’

‘He would talk as long as we wanted him to,’ Mrs Hansbrough said, ‘though actually it was never later than around ten or eleven o’clock.’

‘And did he have a room to himself in your house?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘I have a picture of your house here,’ Swami Ashokananda said. ‘Can you point out his room to me in the picture?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Hansbrough, examining the photo. ‘This shows only the front of the house, and his room was in the back, on the second floor. We all moved to bedrooms in the front of the second floor of the house so that Swamiji could be alone.’

‘Well, now, let us see how he spent his day,’ the swami said. ‘At what time would he come down from his room? What time would he take breakfast?’

‘He usually came down about seven o’clock. There was a bathroom on the second floor where his room was, and I presume he would bathe in the morning, but he didn’t comb his hair.’

‘He didn’t!’ Swami Ashokananda exclaimed.

Mrs Hansbrough smiled. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘Though he was very careful about his dress when he went out, he was very careless about it at home. I remember that he himself remarked about it one Sunday morning: “Why should I be careful of my dress at home? I don’t want to get married!” You see, where we think there is a “proper” dress for the dining room, just as for other times and places, he put all this down as show.

‘This reminds me of Frank Alexander’s writings about Swamiji. You know, he tried to paint Swamiji



The Mead Home (now Vivekananda House), South Pasadena, with views of the dining room and parlour



as a great man in every little detail. My inclination has always been to do just the opposite: that is, to remember him as the real human being he was—to take off any paint of artificiality others tried to apply to him. For he was so great in himself that no paint was ever needed to make him so.

‘As I say, he would come down about seven in the morning, in his bathrobe and slippers and his long black hair not yet combed. He would have some kind of undergarment under his robe, which showed a bit at the neck. I remember that his robe had seen many winters. It was a black and white tweed of some kind, probably with a herringbone pattern in it, and with a cord around the waist.’

‘You said his hair was black, as we know. How did he wear it at this time? Was it long?’ Swami Ashokananda queried.

‘Yes, when Swamiji first came to Los Angeles, his hair had grown long, and it was beautifully wavy. In fact it was so beautiful, and it set off his features so well, that we would not let him cut it again.’



Swami Vivekananda in San Francisco, with long hair

‘So you were responsible for the long hair!’ Swami Ashokananda exclaimed, half jokingly. ‘And you liked it because it was beautiful!’

Mrs Hansbrough smiled assent. ‘Swamiji himself did not object. In fact he appreciated the value that its beauty lent to his appearance. He actually remarked once when we were discussing it, “Beauty has its value.” He was wholly devoid of self-consciousness.’

‘Now, you were saying that he would come downstairs in the morning at about seven o’clock. What time would you have breakfast?’

‘Breakfast would be at about seven thirty, in order to accommodate Helen, who was working, and Ralph, who had to get to school. Swamiji would pass the half hour walking outside.’

‘In his bathrobe?’

‘Yes. You see, at that time that part of town was not very closely built up. There were no houses across the street and the neighbours on either side were separated from our house by trees and shrubs. Swamiji would walk in the garden behind the house, or along the driveway at one side, and no one could see him there.’

‘And what would he usually take for breakfast?’

‘He always had fruit, usually an orange or grapefruit, and he liked poached eggs. He would have toast, and coffee usually.’

‘Did he like his coffee with cream?’

‘Yes, he took cream and I think he took sugar also.’

‘And how big a breakfast would he eat?’

‘Swamiji was a moderate eater. Usually he took two eggs, two pieces of toast, and two cups of coffee. Once I offered him a third cup of coffee. At first he declined, but when I urged him he finally yielded and said: “All right. Woman’s business is to tempt man.”’

‘Breakfast would usually last about an hour, for we never hurried. Ralph had to be at school at eight or eight-thirty, and Helen would leave for work, but the rest of us were not occupied. After breakfast Swamiji would stroll in the garden again or browse through the library. Often he would play with the children in the yard. Dorothy [Hansbrough, who was four years old] had several friends who would come, and Swamiji would hold hands with them and play ring-around-the-rosy and other games. He used to like to talk with them, and would ask them many questions about their activities, why they played this game or that, and so on.

‘He was much interested in the problem of child training, and we often talked of it. He did not believe in punishment. It had never helped him, he said. “And I would never do anything to make a child afraid,” he declared.’

‘Well now, would Swamiji have any classes or meetings in the morning?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, he was having both morning lectures and classes in Los Angeles and Pasadena while he was with us,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘They would start usually at ten-thirty or eleven, and we would leave the house at about ten.’

‘What would Swamiji wear to the meetings? Would he wear his robe?’

‘No, he wore the black garment we see in several of the pictures of him, something like a clerical frock, but looser. Sometimes if it was not too warm he would wear his overcoat over this. He would take his gerua robe and turban in a suitcase, and put them on when he arrived at the meeting place.’

(To be continued)

On Ethics, Education, and Swami Vivekananda

Prof. Bharati Ganguli

(Continued from the previous issue)

BEFORE we try to understand the meaning of the word *perfection* strictly in the Vedantic context in which it has been used, let us see the play of the word elsewhere. We see the word used in fields as diverse as history, poetry, philosophy, and in all the numerous forms of science and art. That truth, goodness, and beauty are the basic conditions of perfection applies everywhere. These three qualities bring out the inherent worth of any discipline—religion above all. Truth, if not supplemented by the energies of goodness and beauty, will not hold good. These three inseparable constituents of perfection are often found to disintegrate and disappear in the course of time, rendering the forms of a given culture dry and dead.

What is the reason? It is in the very nature of things to degenerate. Time devours the freshness of everything, and gradually evil passes for good. On account of excesses on both planes of human action, spiritual and material, an overgrowth of superficialities creates disharmony, and circumstances require a new adjustment. Before this new adjustment takes place tremendous upheavals occur, particularly in the name of religion. The real culprits behind the chaos and anarchy, however, are fanaticism and politics, and never religion per se. History shows that these eat up the vitals of human civilization, and what is still worse, tear off the fairest flower of civilization, that is culture. Dogmas and doctrines usurp the place of truth; the forms, the non-essentials, overshadow the real culture in all spheres of life.

Humans become rootless and continue to grope in the dark. Irreligion prevails, and religion is blamed for the chaos—though it is none of its fault. Swami Vivekananda observes:

‘There are some fools in this world who use brackish water although there is excellent sweet water near by, because, they say, the brackish-water well was dug by their father. Now, in my little experience I have collected this knowledge—that for all the devilry that religion is blamed with, religion is not at all in fault: no religion ever persecuted men, no religion ever burnt witches, no religion ever did any of these things. What then incited people to do these things? Politics, but never religion; and if such politics takes the name of religion whose fault is that?’²

What is religion? Religion is the eye-opener through which one sees the good innate in oneself and in others. How can a person injure others when he recognizes his own soul in them? Let us listen to the message of the Upanishad: ‘*Yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāny-ātmanyevānupaśyati, sarvabhūteṣu cātmanam tato na vijugupsate*’; He who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings—he does not feel any hatred by virtue of that (Realization).³ This is what religion is—this great oneness, this great sameness. The same Reality is behind one and all. And religion alone leads humans towards this grand realization.

Religion and Other Forms of Perfection

Perfection and its pursuit are no less important in religion than they are in other forms of culture. What perfection is and what it consists in are primary concerns in a variety of disciplines. But there is still a fundamental difference that we must remember, lest we oversimplify things: the moral sense is not as strong and binding in the various other domains of culture as it is in religion. Religion makes no concession, no compromise, much less shows indulgence, with re-

Ethics of Virtue: In the West, Plato and Aristotle were perhaps the earliest philosophers to build an ethics of virtue with perfection as the standard. Centuries later, Hegel made a systematic attempt to establish a philosophical basis for the ideal of perfection through his theory of spiritual evolution. In India, the system of Vedanta, especially Advaita Vedanta, upholds the ethics of virtue, the ethics of being (by contrast with the Nyaya and Mimamsaka systems which uphold the ethics of happiness and duty respectively). In the Gita morality is taught by describing the characteristics of the perfected man who is described as the *sthitaprajna*, *gunatita*, and as 'the one who is dear to the Lord'.

—Swami Bhajanananda

garg to moral lapses, because religion is the greatest of all endeavours by which humanity has sought to perfect itself. As is borne out by history, when all the spurious dross is distilled out of religion and it is once again renewed with moral vigour, it proves a stronger, greater force to perfect humankind than any other cultural force such as art, science, or philosophy. In the truth of the oneness of all existence lies the strength of religion. Behind the many there dwells the one, infinite Soul. And perfection consists in Soul-manifestation. The goal is to manifest the Soul by love, action, and knowledge. The mind degenerates when it is enmeshed in the iron chains of rituals, customs, and superstitions; it is regenerated through holy thoughts and pure actions. Only then does it catch a glimpse of the great One, the Real; only then do we become Soul-conscious. So the highest kind of perfection is Soul manifestation, or the realization of Satchidananda through yoga, as has been taught by Swami Vivekananda. By attaining total absorption in the transcendental Absolute, the great goal of human life, one attains the highest culture and becomes perfect.

Morality is part and parcel of religion. People who are not religious in the real sense of the word are often found to be lacking on the moral side. What is true religion? It is the manifestation of the divinity latent in us. Our highest culture, our

greatest glory consists in the attainment of holiness, in our ability to manifest the Divine within. 'Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.' This manifestation can be brought about 'either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy'.⁴ Only this kind of religion keeps wide awake; nothing escapes its notice. Ever watchful of the mind's workings, even during sleep, it inhibits the mind's raw impulses and steadily draws the aspirant towards things that are pure, chaste, moral, uplifting, and conducive to the highest good.

Morality constitutes the bedrock upon which the edifice of Vedantic perfection is built. Soul-manifestation is the deepest meaning of perfection, of which the so-called cultural perfections of art, science, and philosophy are but distant echoes. In no other aspect of culture is the grandeur of the human soul more manifest than in religion. Humanity's long journey in quest of excellence and perfection culminates in religion. Vedantic perfection aims at a root-and-branch reform of the human mind, supplanting harmful old tendencies with helpful new ones, thereby silently doing good to the world. One who has thus perfected oneself diffuses light. Such a one is no longer blind; the veil has dropped from the eyes forever. He or she has overcome all obstacles and has succeeded in manifesting his or her real nature. Identifying him- or herself with the all-embracing Soul, he or she is more divine than human. Only such a person can help others become perfect. Only then is work for the welfare of the world really possible, not before.

Perfection according to Swami Vivekananda

This idea of perfection as Soul-manifestation was developed by Swami Vivekananda and finds expression in his system of ethics and neo-Vedanta. It has introduced a notably new chapter in the field of education. It proclaims the presence of infinite perfection in every one of us, from the humblest to the highest. Of course there are obstacles to its manifestation, and they vary according to the receptacle.

Says Swami Vivekananda: 'In plants the obstacle to soul-manifestation is very great; in animals a little less; and in man still less; in cultured, spiritual men still less; and in perfect men, it has vanished altogether' (1.420). But since each soul has to pass through these different stages, superiority of one over another is out of the question. Moreover, this universe is, in fact, one integral whole. It can be imagined as a vast graph paper with its innumerable little squares representing living beings at different points of perfection.

Perfection is reached at the end of a process of Vedantic moral training. Swamiji describes its main stages in a class lecture delivered in America under the title 'Steps to Realization': (i) *shama*, control of the inner organs; (ii) *dama*, checking their external instruments; (iii) *uparati*, not thinking of things of the senses; (iv) *titiksha*, forbearance; (v) *shraddha*, faith; (vi) *samadhana*, constant practice of holding the mind in God; and (vii) *mumukshutva*, intense desire to be free (1.405-7).

Moments come to everyone when one feels the vanity of worldly things. One no longer wants to be played upon by opposites. One longs to be free and looks upward. This looking upward is the beginning of all progress. So long as a person is a slave, nothing will come to him or her, not even material advancement, let alone spiritual progress. The motive power and the most important condition of all progress is this intense desire to move upward, the desire to cut asunder all lower identifications and become free. In fact, in his lecture on 'Unity, the Goal of Religion', Swami Vivekananda equates it with salvation: 'That looking upward and going upward and seeking perfection are what is called salvation; ... That is what makes for human progress, that is the source of all material and intellectual progress, the motive power behind, the enthusiasm that pushes mankind forward' (3.3).

So the above-mentioned disciplines, when properly practised, will lead the practitioner step by step through various stages of Soul-manifestation, during which one gets an inkling of the nature of the higher Reality, the cause beyond and behind

the sensory world. Practice makes the rising soul perfect. Swamiji compares the struggling soul to a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength till it reaches the glorious Sun (1.17). Even a beginner can advance rapidly if he or she is a sincere practitioner. Since perfection has only been covered up, the more a person practises the sooner will the evil covering be removed. At last the ever-free Soul will manifest Itself in all its pristine purity and majestic effulgence.

Perfect Souls

Rare souls like Buddha, Christ, and Ramakrishna blossomed into full-blown lotuses during the course of a lifetime and reached the highest perfection. They are the great teachers, blessings to humankind. They become one with the universe—only the All lives in them; their own ego is completely dead. The history of humanity is the history of this ceaseless struggle to realize this essence of all, which dwells in the secret chamber of one's heart. It is the light of this perfection alone that shines through the various perfections of art, science, and philosophy. And this can only be reached through religion, the religion lived by a Buddha, a Christ, or a Ramakrishna. No political ideology, no socialism, no scientific technology has the power to transform humans so completely as religious values, especially Vedantic culture.

Swami Vivekananda on Intellectual Culture

Spiritual freedom, according to Swami Vivekananda, is not attained by intellectual culture. Perfection is not so much an intellectual pursuit as a culture of the heart. Reason is the instrument of the intellect, but the heart is the instrument of inspiration. The intellectual can overwhelm others by his power of reasoning and analysis, but his spell lasts for a short while and then is felt no more. Though Swami Vivekananda was always against emotional fanaticism, superstition, and prejudice, he warned westerners of the dangers of a merely intellectual education. It has, according to him, made humans ten times more selfish, as it does not take

A New Theory of Ethics: It is safe to say, having studied his life and message, that Vivekananda may be credited with the creation of a new theory of ethics of universal relevance in the contemporary world. He heralded the dawn of an age of spiritual humanism where abstract philosophical concepts can become universally acceptable because they can appeal to reason as well as human emotions and inspire people to participate actively in life. Religion is not faith, but functioning; not belief, but behaviour; not conviction, but conduct.

—Eleanor Stark

proper care of the heart. What Swamiji desires is a scientific, practical, life-building education. Counting only the twigs, leaves, and branches of the tree of truth, we waste time, never enjoying the fruits. Thus we lose our way and miss our aim. Swamiji points out: 'You never see a strong spiritual man among these "leaf-counters"' (3.50). The Upanishad also teaches: '*Naiṣā tarkaṇa matirāpaneyā*; Not by argumentation is this wisdom attainable.'⁵ Reason never reaches Truth, the Light. The more we argue the farther away we are from the Source, the great One, the basis of our being. Only those who have understood It can communicate It to others.

Swami Vivekananda's Concept of Sameness

An important characteristic of Swami Vivekananda's ethical teachings is his stress on the idea of sameness. What does he mean by sameness? 'The same power is in every man, the one manifesting more, the other less; the same potentiality is in everyone.'⁶ The Vedantists never busy themselves with externals; they are not obsessed with the outward differences, divisions, and dualities. On the other hand, they purify themselves by undergoing the aforementioned disciplines and go straight to the core of their being where they discover their sameness with everything. This identification with everything is the basis of Vedantic morality; this sameness forms the kernel of spirituality. And Swamiji says: 'The more this [spirituality] is developed in a man, the more powerful is he for good' (4.187).

Spirituality is the closest approximation to perfection, but still there is a gap. Obstacles to Soul-manifestation remain for the spiritual person; veils, however thin, still cover the soul. But they are much less than in the case of a merely learned man. And when the spiritual person becomes perfect, they vanish altogether. According to Vedanta, true education consists in the attainment of this perfection, the rediscovery of one's identity with the Absolute and being established in It.

Conclusion

The meaning of perfection has been imaged beautifully in the following story as told by Swamiji:

An ancient sage of the Upanishads sent his son out to learn about Brahman, and the child came back, and the father asked, 'What have you learnt?' The child replied he had learnt so many sciences. But the father said, 'That is nothing, go back.' And the son went back, and when he returned again the father asked the same question, and the same answer came from the child. Once more he had to go back. And the next time he came, his whole face was shining; and his father stood up and declared, 'Ay, today, my child, your face shines like a knower of Brahman.' When you have known God, your very face will be changed, your voice will be changed, your whole appearance will be changed. You will be a blessing to mankind; none will be able to resist the Rishi (3.254).

This is a concrete example of the abstract idea of perfection. One's whole being is changed by the magic touch of a very special culture. The knower of Brahman gives up his or her old personality—which was the result of karma—even while living, and in its place installs an entirely new being. This becoming a totally new person, this attainment of complete fulfilment, seems to be what the phrase *manifestation of perfection* implies.



References

2. *Complete Works*, 4.125.
3. *Isha Upanishad*, 6.
4. *Complete Works*, 1.124.
5. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.9.
6. *Complete Works*, 1.423.

Madurai, the Legendary Temple City

N Hariharan

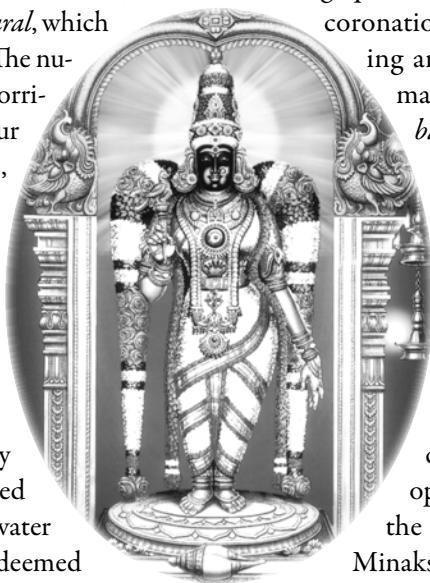
(Continued from the previous issue)

FROM the middle of the eastern corridor, we can see two small towers covered with golden plates in the midst of the eight temple towers. The chief deities, Minakshi and Sundareswarar, are ensconced in sanctums below these golden towers. The wall of the southern corridor is inlaid with marble slabs engraved with 1,330 couplets from Tiruvalluvar's *Tirukkural*, which is celebrated as the Tamil Veda. The numerous pillars in the northern corridor bear the figures of twenty-four poets of the third Tamil *sangam*, but on one of them we also find Kulashekhara Pandyan and on another is Dhananjayan. Bright, colourful paintings on the ceilings of all the corridors depict scenes from the *Tiruvilayadal Puranam*. They say that in the olden days the literary worth of a Tamil work was tested by placing it on a plank on the water of this tank. If it floated, it was deemed worthy, and if it sank, well, it sank!

'Valli, look at that hall built in black marble with an *unjal*, or swing, on the western side of the tank. It is called the Unjal Mandapam. Every Friday, the gold images of Minakshi and Sundareswarar are placed on the swing, gently rocked to the accompaniment of music, and worshipped. The paintings on the ceiling of this mandapam portray Subrahmanya's Arupadai Vidu, or Six Abodes. That smaller mandapam on the opposite side has paintings done during Rani Mangamma's period.

'We now enter the Kilikutu Mandapam, or Parrot-cage Hall. The parrots kept here are trained to call the name of Minakshi and are a great amuse-

ment for the children. The hall's grandeur is enhanced by the long row of 28 pillars and exquisitely carved sculptural pieces. Particularly noteworthy are the figures of Vali, Sugriva, the Pandavas, and Draupadi. A *yali* is engraved on another pillar; a ball of stone revolves in its mouth! There are also two large paintings of Minakshi's wedding and coronation. Mural paintings on the ceiling are eye-catching. Opposite Amman Sannidhi, on one side of the



Devi Minakshi

balipitham, or sacrificial altar, is a pillar bearing the figure of Bhimasena, and on a pillar on the other side is a semi-human figure; both stand in combative poses. In this mandapam, the pillars depict Shiva's miraculous deeds. The figures, though very small, are of unsurpassed charm. The paintings on the canopy represent an array of deities of the Hindu pantheon. The scene of Minakshi's wedding in front of the Sannidhi is attractive.

'Valli, we are now about to enter into the heart of the temple, the Devi's sanctum. Look at the three-storeyed tower at the entrance. It is 40 feet high with the base 27 feet long and 20 feet wide. It is a repository of exquisite sculptures, 476 to be precise. The tower is called Vembattur Tower after its builder Ananda Tandavanambi of Vembattur. On the outer *prakaram*, or circular corridor, can be seen the golden flag-post, the Tirumalai Nayakar Mandapam, brass *dvarapalakas*, and the shrines of Vinayakar and Kudal Kumarar. That is the Kolu Mandapam in the western corner. During the Navaratri festival in the Tamil month of Purat-

tasi, in September-October, the image of Minakshi is exquisitely adorned in nine different ways on the nine days and kept there for public view and worship.

‘To the west is a bigger, five-storeyed tower. This is 54 feet high and its base is 50 feet long and 28 feet wide and is visible even from the western Adi Vithi. The imposing structure has 224 impressive sculptures. At the south-west corner of the inner prakaram is the Vinayakar shrine and at the north-east junction stands that of Kudal Kumarar. Stanzas of the *Tirupugal* sung by the saint Arunagirinathar are inscribed on the walls of this shrine.

‘To the east there is an entrance to Swami Sannidhi. One can reach the Mahamandapam or inner prakaram through the Arukal Pitham. This is where the Shaiva saint Kumara Guruparar sang his “Meenakshi Ammai Pilai Tamil”. The story goes that the goddess was so delighted with the hymns that she appeared before the saint in the form of a small girl and gifted him a pearl necklace. The Arukal Pitham is also the venue of Devi Minakshi’s coronation during the Chitrai festival. The shrines of Airavata Vinayakar and Muttukumarar, and the Palli Arai or Chamber of Repose, can also be seen in the Mahamandapam. Its pillars and ceiling have exquisite pieces of sculpture—for instance that bell hanging from the top. Can you believe it is wholly made of stone? To the west are the Ardhamandapam and the sanctum sanctorum.’

Valli and Selvi are now face to face with Goddess Minakshi. Behind them is a pressing queue of devotees eager to have a glimpse of the deity. ‘How gorgeous Mother looks in her splendid finery and all that sparkling jewellery!’ exclaims Selvi; ‘What sublime grace and charm she exudes as she stands holding a parrot and a bouquet in her hands! Look at her eyes brimming with tenderness, compassion, and love! Valli, perhaps you know that fish-shaped eyes are a mark of exceptional beauty, but Mother

also has the power to bestow all-round welfare on us by a mere glance of those eyes. Just as the mother fish hatches her eggs by lovingly gazing at them, Mother Minakshi vitalizes and nourishes her children by casting her benign glance on them. Don’t you agree, Valli?’ Lost in Devi Minakshi’s wondrous beauty, Valli nods assent.

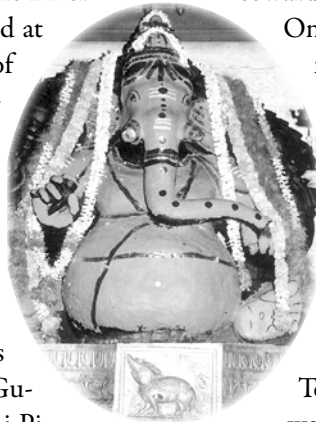
The girls exit the sanctum sanctorum and move towards the shrine of Lord Sundareshvarar.

On the way, a colossal statue of Ganesha makes Valli draw her breath in astonishment. The statue is really gigantic; it is eight feet tall. However, Vinayakar, seated on a high pedestal, looks equally compassionate. Selvi explains: ‘This marvellous image is known as Mukkuruni Vinayakar. It was found when Tirumalai Nayakar dug the Vandiyur Mariamman Teppakulam. It faces the south, as if to welcome the devotees. On the sacred Vinayaka Chaturthi day, a big *kozhukkattai*, a ball of rice mixed with sugar and coconut, made from three *kurunis* (equivalent to 34 kilograms) is offered to the god, so the name Mukkuruni Vinayakar.

‘The outer prakaram is 420 feet long and 310 feet broad while the inner prakaram is 250 feet by 158 feet. West of this is a five-storeyed tower, built in 1374 by one Mallappan. It is 72 feet high with a base measuring 48 feet by 31 feet. There are 40 sculptures on this tower.

‘Now comes the corner where we see the figures of the forty-nine poets of the *kadai*, or last, *sangam*. North of this is a mandapam where weekly group prayers are held. Adjoining this is a five-storeyed tower, built by Sevantivelappa Chettiar in 1560. It is 71 feet high with a base 45 feet long and 34 feet wide. This tower has 18 sculptures. At the top of the tower can be seen the majestic figure of a *vrishabha*, or bull, Shiva’s mount.

‘Valli, do you see that mandapam over there at the north-eastern corner? That is the main mandapam and is supported by 100 pillars. It too contains



Mukkuruni Vinayakar

some fine pieces of sculpture. A lovely idol of Nataraja is installed there. The mandapam was built by Chinnappa Nayakar in 1526. At the south-eastern corner is the Jnanasambandhar temple. Here we find statues of Mangayarkarasi, Kulachirayar, Kunpandyan, Sambandhar, Appar, Sundarar, and Manikkavachakar. This mandapam was built by Krishnavirappa Nayakar.

Moving on, the two friends reach another large and spacious mandapam, its pillars embellished with images of surpassing beauty. Selvi continues: 'This is the well-known Kadambatadi Mandapam. A veritable treasure trove of sculptural riches, it is a connoisseur's paradise. You will notice that we are now in the outer prakaram right in front of the Sundareshvarar shrine. Each one of the sculptural pieces and the architecture of the building as a whole is a feast for discerning eyes. See that golden flagstaff, Nandi, and the balipitham at the centre. Look at these intricate sculptural carvings on each of the eight ornamental pillars depicting Shiva's different manifestations: Ardhanarishwarar, Dakshinamurty, Rudrar, Bhikshadanar, Lingodbhavar, Vrishabharudrar, Somaskandar, Ekapadamurty, Chandrashekharar, Natarajar, and Somasundarar. You can also see the ten incarnations of Vishnu.



The Celestial Wedding

The Celestial Wedding

'But the sculpture depicting Meenakshi's wedding is the best of all. It is a striking example of Dravidian temple art. Look at the colossal statues of Agni Virabhadra, Aghora Virabhadra, Kali, and Shiva close by.' Valli stands transfixed, captivated by it all. The scene, capturing the sublime solemnity of Vishnu's offering of his sister Minakshi in marriage to Sundareshvarar, enthralled Valli. She exclaims, 'How skilfully the sculptor has distilled profound moods with the subtle nuances of his creation! While bridal shyness oozes through the figure of Minakshi

with her slightly bent head, Sundareshvarar, with His benign smile, exudes at once masculine charm and deep self-possession, while Sundararajar, as Vishnu is called, moves us by his look, reflective of joy not unmixed with a tinge of pain of impending separation from his sister.'

Selvi resumes her narration. 'Now look at this cluster of pillars. On one pillar stands a formidable Shiva, ensconced in a chariot and ready to mount an attack on the demons on the opposite pillar. It represents the story of Shiva's awesome fight with the demon Tripura. With a view to storming the three magic cities of the demons and destroying them, Shiva made earth his chariot and rode into the battlefield. The sun and the moon were the wheels of the chariot, the four Vedas were the horses, and the Upnishads the reins. Vishnu himself became Shiva's terrible bow. Thus equipped, the god destroyed Tripura's three impregnable fortresses, made of iron, silver, and gold.

'That pillar over there illustrates the story of the great devotee Markandeya. According to a Puranic story, Shiva saved his devotee from death by kicking Yama with his left foot! And on the other one is Nataraja. Notice the network of designs detailing the incident of Shiva's burning of Manmatha, Cupid.'

The superb artistic excellences whet Valli's enthusiasm, which grows still keener. Suddenly, something wonderful catches her eyes. 'What is that? It looks like a huge demon about to be crushed under a mountain. And Parvati-Parameshvara, sitting on top of the mountain, seem to be enjoying the demon's plight!' Selvi is ready with the mythology: 'You are right. That is Ravana caught under Mount Kailasa. Ravana was a great devotee of Shiva. Once, in his impudence, he dared to lift the mountain, the abode of his chosen deity. But Shiva humbled him by pressing his toe on the mountain, which bore down on Ravana, causing him to wail aloud.

Ravana was released only after pacifying Shiva by playing on his lute and singing *sama* chants.'

Pointing to a design on another pillar, Valli asks, 'Is there any story behind that carving which shows a huge column of light? What do the figures of the swan and boar symbolize?' 'That column of light was the form Shiva assumed in order to curb the pride of Brahma and Vishnu, who had fallen into a dispute as to who was greater between the two,' Selvi explains. 'Emerging from the linga as Lingodbhavamurti in the form of a massive pillar of effulgence, Shiva declared that the one who found either the top or the bottom of the pillar of light would be the greater of the two. Brahma promptly assumed the form of a swan and soared up to find the top, and Vishnu took the form of a boar and burrowed through the netherworlds in search of the bottom. However, both were unsuccessful in their attempts. But while Vishnu humbly admitted his failure, Brahma falsely claimed to have seen the top of the pillar of light. He tried to buttress his claim by presenting as proof a petal of the *ketaki* flower, which he said was taken from Shiva's matted locks. Enraged by Brahma's falsehood, Shiva cursed him that he would never receive temple worship and that the *ketaki* would no more be used in Shiva worship—as punishment for its complicity in the entire affair! But Valli, the implication of the story is that Brahman, here represented by Shiva, can be realized neither by discursive knowledge, symbolized by Brahma, nor by material wealth, symbolized by Vishnu.' Valli had never realized that Puranic stories were so full of meaning.

Selvi continues: 'You know that Shiva is sometimes represented in his peculiar dichotomous form, as Ardhanarishvara. This sculpture here shows him with the left half of his body feminine and the right half masculine. Thus Purusha and Prakriti are combined in one form—but it also suggests that he is beyond both aspects. In another dichotomous representation on a pillar over there, the left side of the image shows Vishnu in his silken raiment, with ornaments and weapons, while the right side shows Shiva with his matted locks, his ash-smeared body

clad in antelope skin. This is the Shankaranarayana form that strikes at the root of the supposed divorce between Shiva and Vishnu. And there is Shiva in his meditative pose; he is facing the south. Young in age but ripe in wisdom, he imparts spiritual knowledge to his four old disciples, the four eternal sages Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatana, and Sanatkumara, through mystic Silence. That is his Dakshinamurti form.

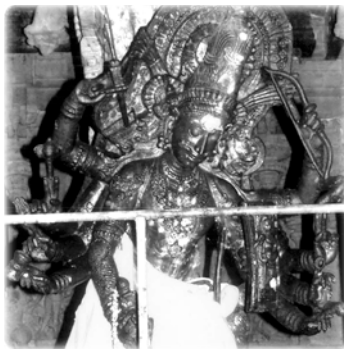
'Do you see that fine sculpture showing Shiva killing an elephant? It is called Gajaharamurti. The elephant was in fact a demon masquerading as a rampaging tusker and intending to kill Shiva, here shown as Bhikshadanar. The demon was set upon Shiva by the jealous sages of Darukavana, whose wives were carried away by the god's beauty. On the next pillar are the figures of Bhikshadanar, Rudrar, Kiratarjunar, and Somaskandar. You can also see the ten avatars of Vishnu engraved at the bottom of some pillars. The carvings on this other pillar here feature a story in which Shiva helps an old woman on the banks of the Vaigai. Valli, these precious sculptural treasures so intricately woven into the elegant architecture of the temple mainly revolve round our ancient mythology and hoary culture, proclaiming their undying value.'

Four immense statues on the eastern side of the Kadambatadi Mandapam now draw Valli's attention. They are the imposing figures of Agni Virabhadrar and Aghora Virabhadrar and the awe-inspiring forms of Urdhva Tandavar (Nataraja) and Bhadrakali. 'Oh, how fantastic!' Valli utters in wonderment. 'What disciplined minds and deft hands the sculptor must have been blessed with for his images to reflect such difficult moods as fury and fortitude, resolve and ruthlessness so effectively! They must have been extraordinary artists. But Selvi, isn't it funny that Agni Virabhadrar and Aghora Virabhadrar are bespattered with globs of butter? Any story behind this?' Selvi has ready answers even for unexpected questions. 'Devotees throw butter at the frightful forms in order to pacify them!' She continues: 'Be that as it may, do you notice anything special about the Urdhva Tandavar statue? Well, normally Nataraja is portrayed with his left

leg raised, but here he performs a rare type of dance with his right leg raised straight up so that it almost touches his right ear. Anyway, now let's proceed to Lord Shiva's shrine.'

As they approach the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum, Selvi points to two 12-foot-high *dvarapalakas* on either side and begins her commentary: 'See the images of Shiva and Minakshi—both with five faces? You can also see the statues of the four saints Appar, Sundarar, Sambandhar, and Manikkavachakar nearby. Their lyrical outpourings in praise of the Lord in chaste Tamil are known as the *Tevaram*, or "A Garland for the Divine". Look at the three-storeyed tower of Swami Sannidhi. It is 41 feet high with a base 31 feet long and 18 feet wide and contains 36 sculptures. It was built by Kulashekhara Pandyan in 1168.' The girls enter the sanctum, a quadrilateral structure with artistic engravings of sixty-four *bhuta ganas* (Shiva's companions), eight elephants, and thirty-two lions. 'Valli, this is the linga of Lord Sundareswarar, also known as Chokkanathar and Karapurachokkar. It is installed under a golden canopy called the *Indravimanam*. The linga is an ingenious device that represents the two apparently contradictory aspects of the Godhead. As a tangible image it surely has a form, but being featureless it can be considered formless. It is, so to say, in the twilight zone between form and formlessness and admirably signifies the indefinability of the Infinite. Again, the linga is also a visual symbol of Om. It is believed to comprise the four deities Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, and Shiva. The base of the linga is Brahma, the encircling portion is Vishnu, the cylindrical portion is Rudra and the crown is Shiva. The first three stand for the three mystic sounds *a, u,* and *m* respectively; Shiva is the *amatra*—unmanifest sound—underlying *omkara* (*aum*). So the linga is doubtless a true symbol of the Absolute. For all that, as I said before, here in this temple it is still Mother who receives worship first!

'Valli! Look at the imposing statues of Adhikara



Aghora Vira-bhadra, Bhadrakali, and Urdhva Tandavar (Nataraja) (clockwise from top)



Nandi, or Nandi the Authority, and Chamundi. And that six-foot-high dais is where Paranjyoti Munivar's *Tiruvilayadal* was formally released. The copper coverings that you see on the dais were gifted by Tirumalai Nayakar. Observe the figures of Paranjali and Vyaghrapadar with folded palms carved on the pillars facing the dais.

'This prakaram abounds in attractive sculptures depicting the Shiva lilas. On the southern side we find a row of images of the sixty-three Nayanmars; there is also an image of Saraswati. At the southwestern corner is the *utsava murti*, which is used for processions during festivals, and at the north-western corner are the images of Kashi Vishvanathar and Bhikshadanar. We are now in the northern prakaram. Look at the image of the bearded Siddhar facing the east. Next to him stands Durga on an elevated pedestal, facing the north. How well-crafted the image is with its distinct features—Mother looks so divine! Look at the legendary kadamba tree whose trunk is still preserved. And yonder is the *yaga shala* and a well beside a *vanni* tree. In this corridor there is also an opening leading to a tun-



*Thousand Pillar Hall, above
Devi Saraswati, left*



nel, which once upon a time led to Tirumalai Nayakar's palace. The royal family used to come to the temple through this path. The tunnel also served as a secret vault to store valuable temple ornaments during times of alien attack.

'Valli, we have just completed our circumambulation of the outer prakaram of the temple and are about to enter the inner prakaram. Now, this big hall is called Velli Ambalam, or Silver Hall. This is the hall that I spoke about earlier. Look at the exquisite image of Nataraja dancing with his right leg raised. The fact that the image is set in a silver enclosure gives this hall its name. It is also believed that Nataraja performed the rare *jnanasundara tandavam* here to please the devotee-king Rajashekhara Pandyan. There are four other halls in the temple—Kanaka Sabha and Ratna Sabha in the first corridor, Deva Saba in the Hundred Pillar Hall, and Chitra Sabha in the Thousand Pillar Hall—but they are of minor importance compared to Velli Ambalam.

Coming out of the prakaram the two girls find

themselves back in the Kadambatadi Mandapam. Selvi tells her friend that the five-storeyed tower on the eastern side of the mandapam is 66 feet high with the base 42 feet long and 33 feet wide. It has 280 sculptures on it and was built in 1372 by Vasuvappan. To the east, beyond this tower, is another big mandapam. 'This is called the Viravasantarayar Mandapam,' begins Selvi. 'It was built by Tirumalai Nayakar's elder brother Muttuvirappa Nayakar. It has 46 pillars. The eyes of the big Nandi statue in front are fixed on his master Sundareshvarar. Some of the pillars here are studded with fine sculptural pieces calling to mind interesting mythological stories, like Shiva's rescue of Markandeya from Yama. The dancing Bhadrakali and the *dvarapalakas* are very popular. The tall arch of lights that you see above was donated by the Marudu Pandyas; the lights are maintained by the Shivagangai Devasthanam. Here you can see rows of shops on both sides selling puja articles, bangles, brassware, and things like that.

'Valli, just a few steps from here and adjoining this structure is the Thousand Pillar Mandapam, which is another treasure-house. It was built in 1569 by Dalavoi Ariyanatha Mudaliar. Originally there must have been 1,000 pillars—there are only 985 now—probably the missing ones made way for the two small temples that we find here. This *mandapam* is 250 feet long and 240 feet wide. It has been built to look like a huge chariot drawn by two elephants. Look at that figure of a wheel at the top of the entrance; see how graphically the features of the sixty Tamil years are described there! At the entrance is the majestic Ariyanatha Mudaliar on a horse, and the statue of Kannappa Nayanar close by. Kannappa was such an ardent Shivabhakta that he did not hesitate to gouge out his own eyes and offer them to the Lord! Then come the statues of Satya Harishchandra and his wife Chandramati. How poignant the weebegone Chandramati looks, holding her dead son in her arms! And over here are the well-known figures of Kuravan and Kuratti, the gypsy couple. Don't they look so realistic?



Devotees throng through the Minakshi temple complex

Observe how their rugged physical features, their poverty, and their travails are mirrored in stone; and you can't miss that monkey on a leash or the couple's unruly children! See this stern-faced, resolute Shiva trampling a demon beneath his feet; but you can also make out an ineffable smile on his lips and the profound quiet of his face. One wonders how the sculptor succeeded in bringing out such conflicting emotions at the same time!

'The other creations that you find on the pillars of this mandapam are a woman playing on a vina, Murugan riding his peacock, the figure of a eunuch, and the exquisite Rati, Manmatha's consort. The images on the whole present a refined commentary on the science of erotics. Thus the Thousand Pillar Mandapam indeed lays out a delightful sculptural repast to genuine connoisseurs. In the olden days, it also used to be the venue of the royal court.

'From here let us turn south and we will reach an open area with a newly built mandapam that bears the name of a saintly queen who contributed a lot to the growth of Shaivism and Tamil. It is called Mangayarkarasi Mandapam. It houses statues of Mangayarkarasi, Kulachirayar, Kun Pandyan, and Jnanasambandhar. South of this is the Servaikarar Mandapam built by the Marudu Pandyas sometime in the mid-eighteenth century. We find the figure of the elder Marudu on the left pillar.'

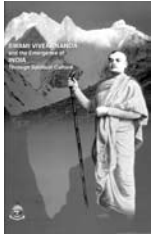
'Selvi, what is that ornate hall over there? It looks somewhat special with its copper-plated roof.' 'Oh, that is the famous Tirukalyana Mandapam,

or Marriage Hall,' replies Selvi. 'That is where the wedding of Minakshi-Sundareshvarar is celebrated every year at the time of the Chitrai festival. During April-May the entire city of Madurai goes delirious with joy. A spirit of devotion pervades the entire atmosphere as people from far and near converge on Madurai to participate in the festivities and experience the exalted mood they generate. That dais, on which the actual ceremony is performed, and the black stone mandapam were built by Vijayaranga Chokkanathar. See his figure carved on the first pillar on the southern side? On the southern and northern walls, attractive paintings within those big circles graphically depict the origin of the universe and its living beings. The hall measures 97 by 47 feet, spacious enough to accommodate the devotees. There are wooden carvings and paintings on the top portion. See there, those are the pictures of Vynagaram Venkatachalam Chettiar and Nagappa Chettiar, who built this mandapam.

'Now, Valli, let us go to the southern Adi Vithi. To reach there we need to cross the Muttuvirappa and Minakshi Nayakar Mandapams. The Adi Vithi are the outermost streets around the temple but within its precincts. The temple elephants and camels are kept in the courtyard at the eastern end of the temple. As we walk west along the southern Adi Vithi, we will find the temple offices, library, the Tevaram School, Tiruppugal Sabha, Divaneri-kalagam, Panniru Tirumurai Manram, and Dandapani Tiruppugal Manram.' (To be concluded)

REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



Swami Vivekananda and the Emergence of India through Spiritual Culture (Illustrated) Comp. Swami Sarvasthananda

Ramakrishna Ashrama, Dr Yagnik Road,
Rajkot 360 001. E-mail: srkaraj_ad1@sancharnet.in. 2005. 90 pp. Rs 300.

Vivekananda was a soul of puissance if ever there was one, a very lion among men,' observed Sri Aurobindo, 'but the definite work he has left behind is quite incommensurate with our impression of his creative might and energy. We perceive his influence still working gigantically, we know not well how, we know not well where, in something that is not yet formed, something leonine, grand, intuitive, upheaving that has entered the soul of India and we say, "Behold, Vivekananda still lives in the soul of his Mother and in the souls of her children.'" These words remain as valid today as they were in pre-independence India when they were pronounced, for the spirit of Swami Vivekananda continues to shape and mould the Indian nation and its culture even though we are often not conscious of the power and extent of his influence.

Over a hundred years ago Swami Vivekananda announced: 'This motherland of ours ... is awakening! ... the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see, or the perverted will not see, that she is awakening, this motherland of ours, from her deep long sleep. None can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward powers can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet.' Even a school student of today can affirm that this statement has proved prophetic.

As India goes global, we can look back on Swamiji's exhortations to this very end: 'We cannot do without the world outside India; it was our foolishness that we thought we could, and we have paid the penalty by about a thousand years of slavery. ... The more you go out and travel among the nations of the world, the better for you and for your country. If you had done that for hundreds of years past, you would

not be here today at the feet of every nation that wants to rule India.'

'For a complete civilization the world is waiting, waiting for the treasures to come out of India, waiting for the marvellous spiritual inheritance of the race, which, through decades of degradation and misery, the nation has still clutched to her breast.' Swami Vivekananda made us aware of our spiritual and cultural treasures and the need for their dissemination. This elegant and colourful volume gives us an overview of Swami Vivekananda's life and times, of the Mission he set in motion, of his perennial message and its relevance to our times. Rich in text and illustrations, this is a volume to cherish.

PB



Hindu Pilgrim Centres Swami Harshananda

Ramakrishna Math, Bull Temple Road,
Bangalore 560 019. E-mail: rkmbblr_publi@vsnl.net. 2005. vi +178 pp. Rs 40.

Sri Ramakrishna says, 'Know for certain that there is a special manifestation of God where for a long time many people have practiced austerities, concentration, meditation, japa, prayer, and worship in order to attain His vision. Their devotion has caused a spiritual atmosphere to solidify in that place, so one can easily become spiritually awakened and have a vision of God there.' It is this 'special manifestation of God' that draws countless seekers from all religions to places of pilgrimage.

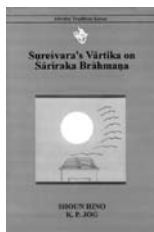
A pilgrimage consists not only of an arduous journey, physical hardship, special prayers and rituals, and the darshan of deities. Its success depends on proper preparation: 'Unless one first devoutly cultivates divine feelings in the heart, one cannot get any special benefit from a pilgrimage,' says Sri Ramakrishna. And after the completion of the journey, the pilgrim must 'chew the cud': 'After visiting temples and holy places, one should sit in a secluded spot to ruminate and become absorbed in the godly

thoughts that arose in the mind there. ... [Otherwise] those godly thoughts cannot leave permanent impressions on the mind.'

From Kedarnath to Kanyakumari and Dwaraka to Dakshineswar, India is the *tirtha-bhumi*: in no other land do we find so many holy places of pilgrimage. Swami Harshananda describes forty-six of these in his new book. The book is not a pilgrim guide, as the author cautions, but a gathering of brief descriptions of major pilgrim centres in India, noting especially the history of each place, stories and legends connected with it, the special features of a pilgrimage there, the architectural details of some of the temples, and the deities to be seen. The author also discusses the purpose of, literature on, eligibility for, and procedure for pilgrimage, in light of the Hindu shastras.

Reading about these holy places—places inextricably interwoven with the living *sanatana dharma* through the millennia of India's spiritual life—has whet the appetite of this reviewer for making pilgrimage; and this is one great value of the book: it gives us new inspiration and impetus to undertake one of the most ancient and effective forms of spiritual practice.

PB



**Suresvara's Vārtika on
Śāṅkara Brāhmaṇa**

Shoun Hino and K P Jog

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007. E-mail: mlbd@vsnl.com. 2005. xx + 489 pp. Rs 795.

Mahamahopadhyaya Prof. S Kuppaswami Sastri has observed that of all the Upanishads, the *Brihadaranyaka* is the greatest 'in the sense that the illimitable, all-embracing, absolute, self-luminous, blissful reality—the *brhat* or Brahman, identical with Atman—constitutes its theme. And, according to Sri Shankara, it may be said to be the greatest Upanishad also for the reason that it comprehends both the *upadeśa* or revelation of the true nature of the mystic experience of the Brahman-Atman identity, and the *upapatti* or logical explanations of that great doctrine of Advaita through the employment of the dialectic modes of argumentation known as *jalpa* (arguing constructively as well as destructively for victory) and *vāda* (arguing for truth).' This Upanishad reveals to us the towering personality of the great Upanishadic thinker Yajñavalkya, who affirmed '*neti*

neti', that is, the indescribability of Brahman, the ultimate Truth. It is on this basis that Acharya Shankara elaborated his system of non-dualistic Vedānta.

There is no denying that the *Bhashya* of Shankaracharya on this Upanishad occupies a central position in Vedāntic literature. But due to his very short life, the Acharya's commentary became somewhat brief, leaving quite a lot of his insights unclear to his contemporaries. It was left to his illustrious pupil Sureshvara to clarify his guru's thought in its fullness; consequently, he wrote the *Brihadaranyakopaniṣad Bhashya Vartika*. The last term, *vārtika*, is the technical term for discussions on the *ukta* (said), *anukta* (unsaid), and *durukta* (ill-said) portions of a text. With his characteristic skill, Sureshvaracharya has underlined virtually every aspect of the Acharya's commentary. He was well-versed in Nyaya and Mimamsa in particular, which gave him the unique opportunity to study and make an in-depth analysis of the text, thus clarifying the method of non-dualistic Vedānta.

Sureshvaracharya's method of discussion on the 'Shariraka Brahmana', the authors point out, is somewhat different from that on the other portions of this Upanishad. Herein he has dwelt in detail upon the technical connotation of such terms as *vidyā* and *avidyā*, *kāma*, *nitya*- and *niṣiddha-karma*, *ātmasvarūpa*, *prajñā*, *sannyāsa*, and *mokṣa*. These terms are frequently misunderstood—commonplace though they are—and an adequate comprehension of their meaning is indispensable to any valid representation of Advaita. 'This is why we notice here explanations of the most significant words of the *kevaladvaita* theory based on the Upanishads.'

The *Vartika* deals with the views of such thinkers as Bhartriprapancha and Mandana, views which appear very similar to that of Acharya Shankara, but which are, in fact, not consistent with the Advaitic standpoint. The *Vartika* lucidly clarifies why it is so.

Like many other scholars of Vedānta, Sureshvaracharya has underscored the discussions on the nature of the means of knowing and their interrelations. *Brihadaranyakopaniṣad Bhashya Vartika* is, after all, an intellectual exercise in Upanishadic texts. But it is the Upanishadic context of the text and the skill and insight of the author that make this work remarkable. Shoun Hino and K P Jog are to be thanked for their tireless effort to make this text available to English readers.

Prof. Amalendu Chakraborty

Former Head, Department of Philosophy
Presidency College, Kolkata



Meditation without Gurus

Clark Strand

New Age Books, A 44, Naraina Phase I,
New Delhi 110 028. E-mail: nab@vsnl.in.
2005. xv + 167 pp. Rs 195.

What would you do if you were given a book on meditation by an author who walked out of his second year at college after telling the Dean: 'What I'm feeling isn't depression, it's despair'? What if the author has also ruined a marriage 'by neglect and spiritual *dis-ease*', then turned into a Zen Buddhist monk, which vocation also he quits to settle into a second marriage and to raise a family? In between, his therapist has told him that 'something had gone terribly wrong with my life' while his Christian parents believed that 'it was my destiny to fulfil this special though unusual role.'

If these credentials do not evoke much confidence, then actually reading this book may come as some surprise. For the unpretentious insights that the author provides on the Zen technique of using breath-counting as a meditative method are certainly fresh and valuable even though they may not be unfamiliar to the reader. Perhaps it is this very act of taking a fresh look at the commonplace that is at the heart of Zen Buddhism.

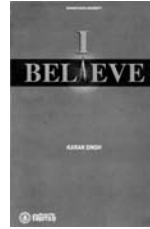
Here is a sample of these insights: 'The secret of meditation lies in understanding that we all have this inner steadiness and calm and we can access it right away, without obsessively monitoring or telling ourselves what to do.' 'Meditation is a kind of paradox. The harder you try to grasp it the further away it goes.' 'Meditation doesn't make us better or worse or different than we are, it only wakes us up.' 'The way to get rid of a boomerang is not to throw it but to leave it where it is and step over it. ... In meditation we leave a boomerang [a recurrent thought] right where it is.' 'Once you have learned to trust in the solidity of your problems—once you've learned that real problems don't just go away—then you can learn to relax and let go more fully when you meditate.'

Then there are the practical insights into how a fly on the wall can, unbeknownst to us, become a focus for deep concentrative insight, how a three-year-old can teach us about 'sharing' by deciding to 'share myself' during a sharing-session at nursery school, how easily we can all connect to a sunrise, and how his teacher Deh Chun never really 'taught' the author anything, for there is really nothing to teach; 'there is only the present we share with everyone and eve-

rything that is'.

'If you want to be sincere,' says Clarke, 'be simple; if you want to meditate, stay low.' This book certainly provides inspiration for staying simple and low.

PB



I Believe

Karan Singh

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati
Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400 007. E-mail:
brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in. 2006. xii +
75 pp. Rs 90.

The author of this book is a well-known personality of contemporary India. He has held several important positions in the field of administration and politics. At the same time he is deeply spiritual. This is a rare combination in post-independence India.

In this small book, Dr Karan Singh has described his philosophy of life. There are twelve short essays covering practically all aspects of human life. Commencing with a brief introduction to yoga, he has encompassed in his essays the political, economic, social, and religious aspects of life today. He has also touched upon some global issues like environmental pollution and terrorism, and the contemporary evils of Indian society. In the last article, he strikes the optimistic note that there is a purpose behind every event in the cosmos. Without this faith, life loses all its meaning.

This book has been published to mark the author's turning seventy-five. In a way, Dr Singh has taken a look back into his life and has tried to crystallize his thoughts and opinions concerning contemporary issues. Some of his thoughts are based upon his direct dealings with the issues during the tenure of his official duties. Certain others are based upon his wide reading of scriptural texts, along with the works of great masters like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. The author's opinions, or beliefs as he calls them, need to be taken seriously and pondered upon, since they are based on a wealth of experience gained during a life lived richly.

Dr Karan Singh has the capacity to put forth his ideas lucidly, which makes the reading of this book a pleasant experience.

Dr N V C Swamy

Dean of Academic Programmes
Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana
Bangalore

REPORTS

News from Belur Math

The birthday (tithi-puja) of Swami Vivekananda was celebrated at Belur Math on 10 January 2007. Thousands of devotees attended the celebration throughout the day. Cooked prasad was served to about 19,000 devotees.

Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the new building for the Probationers Training Centre for brahmacharins at Belur Math on 20 January.

Achievements

Four students of the new MSc program in mathematics at **Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha Vidyamandira, Belur**, have been awarded the prestigious National Board of Higher Mathematics (NBHM) MSc scholarship: Pritam Ghosh, Sabayasachi Dutta, Bodhisattwa Basu, and Panchugopal Bikram. Two BSc graduates of Vidyamandira were also awarded the scholarship: Sugato Mondal and Anjan Gupta. Thirty scholarships were awarded in all of India. The awardees will receive a monthly scholarship of Rs 4,000 and an annual book grant of Rs 10,000 for two years.

A student of **Ramakrishna Mission School, Cherrapunjee**, stood first in the secondary stage State Talent Search Examination for 2005-06.

Jaydeep Poddar of **Ramakrishna Mission School, Baranagar**, stood first among Bengali submissions to the All India Essay Competition on Vehicular Pollution conducted by the United Schools Organization of India, New Delhi. The competition was held in 16 languages, among students of classes 9-12.

National Youth Day

Centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission celebrated National Youth Day on 12 January with processions, speeches, competi-



National Youth Day celebrations, Patna: Vedic chanting, Bihar chief minister Sri Nitish Kumar, and the youth

tions, performances, and other events. Some of the important programs are given below: Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, with Saradapitha (processions, speeches, recitations, music, audio-drama, yogasana demonstration); Bhubaneswar (national integration camp addressed by Orissa chief minister Sri Naveen Patnaik), Chandigarh (blood donation camp), Lucknow (youth convention), Madurai (essay competition in which 12,100 students from 75 schools and 14 colleges participated), Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House (youth convention, seminars, spiritual retreat), Vadodara (youth convention), Vijayawada (youth meet, seminar).

Ramakrishna Mission, Vijayawada inaugurated its 'Viveka Vahini' programme on National Youth Day. Viveka Vahini is a 'Vivekananda-mobile', with audio-video equipment, pictorial exhibits, a beautiful life-size image of Swamiji, and literature on his life and message. It will go to different educational institutions and rural areas, bringing Swamiji's message to students and villagers, and will focus on personality development, national integration, and other themes of national interest in the light of Swamiji's teachings.



Batticaloa
(clockwise from
left): refugee
children, ware-
house camp,
administering
medical aid

Relief

Refugee Relief: **Ramakrishna Mission, Batticaloa** reports that, due to recent ethnic disturbances in the eastern part of Sri Lanka, 72,000 people have been displaced from Vaharai, Sampoor, and Muthur. Among the displaced, 17,700 are children, of whom 10,500 are school-going. 41,500 people of 1,160 families are in 61 refugee camps. The rest are in temporary shelters, under trees, and with well-wishers. 15,000 people are still trapped in Vaharai and are undergoing immense hardship, deprived of food, proper shelter, basic medical facilities, and education. Ramakrishna Mission, Batticaloa started providing food and medical care to the displaced people in Manmunai area from 25 December 2006; the ashrama distributed food items for breakfast and dinner for more than 44,500 persons and lunch for 46,922 persons in six places in the month of January. Also, more than 1,500 people received medical treatment in the camps.


Winter Relief: 10,292 blankets were distributed through the following centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission to poor people affected by the severity of winter: Agartala (435), Bankura (790), Baranagar Mission (2,150), Barasat (500), Garbeta (50), Kanpur (145), Katihar (400),

Malda (532), Medinipur (253), Muzaffarpur (970), New Delhi (631), Patna (1,020), Puri Math (106), Silchar (110), Vrindaban (2,200).

Distress Relief: The following centres distributed various items to poor and needy persons of nearby areas: Baranagar Mission (100 saris), Belgaum (200 saris, 80 plates and tumblers), Kanpur (338 sweaters), Medinipur (50 saris and 40 dhotis), Puri Math (132 sweaters), Silchar (946 saris, 565 dhotis, and 145 chaddars), Ulsoor (2,000 saris), Vrindaban (1,000 dhotis).

Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad sunk two bore-wells at Peddapuram and Devarampalli villages in Ranga Reddy district, under the scheme Amruta Ganga.

Fire Relief: Chandigarh centre distributed 60 kg wheat flour, 60 kg rice, 24 kg dal, 12 litres edible oil, 12 kg salt, and 12 quilts to 12 families whose huts had been gutted by fire at Dhaka Colony Slum in Panchkula district.

Mela Service: **Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan** organized a round-the-clock medical relief camp during Makar Sankranti Mela at Sagar Island in South 24 Parganas district from 10 to 15 January. A total of 5,190 patients were treated, out of which 45 received indoor medical care. Also, 125 blankets and 50 items of clothing were distributed to poor pilgrims and monks. **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Manasadwip** arranged board and lodging facilities for 800 pilgrims at residential camps in the mela area and the Ashrama. 

Corrections: Jan. 2007, p. 11: Swami Virajananda was the sixth President of the Ramakrishna Order, not the tenth; pp. 4 & 5: for *karmāṣaya*, read *karmāśaya*, for *kleśas*, *kleśas*.